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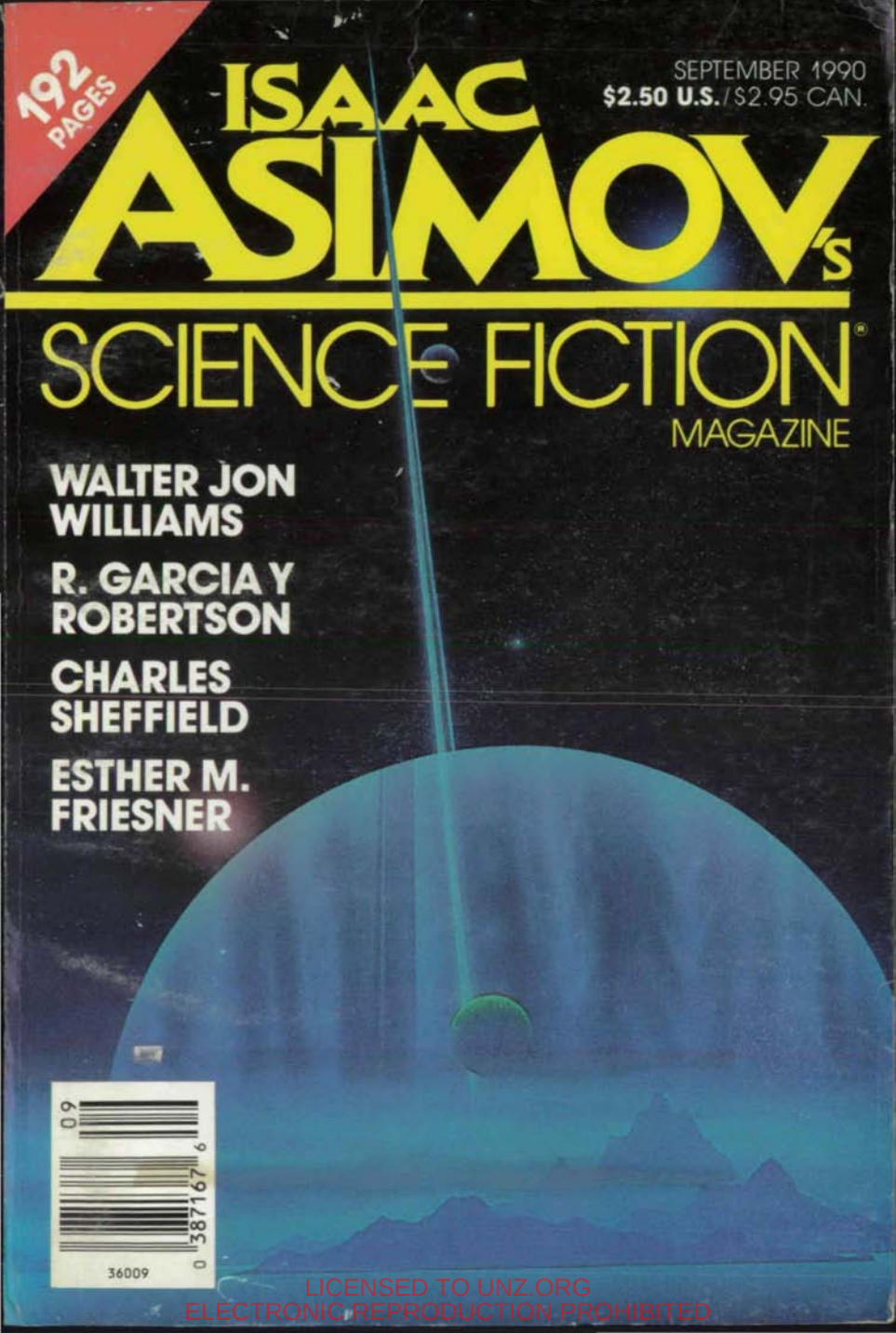

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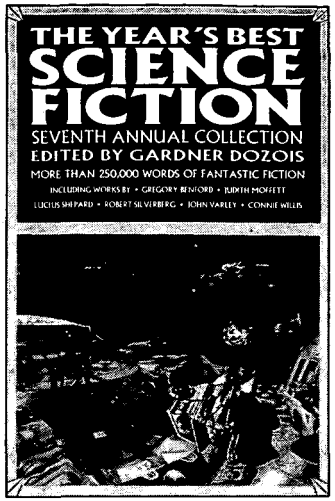
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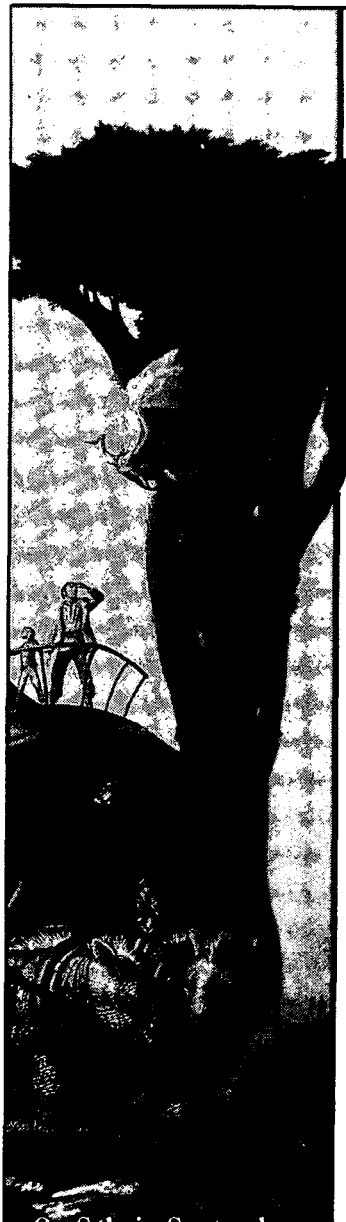

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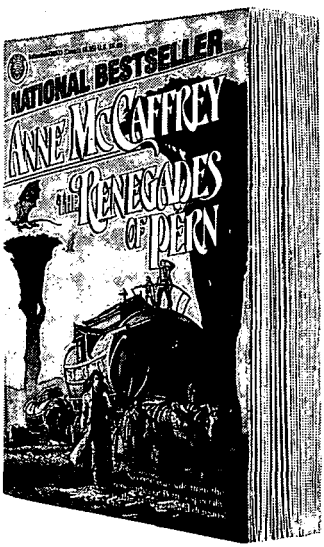

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

GRUMBLES OF MY OWN

Recently, I read *Grumbles from the Grave,* a posthumous collection of the letters of Robert A. Heinlein, edited by Virginia Heinlein and published by Del Rey Books.

I was astonished at the trouble that Heinlein seemed to have in connection with money and with the efforts of editors to force him to revise his novels. As the universally acknowledged master of the art of science fiction writing, it seemed to me that he should have had trouble in neither direction.

I thanked my lucky stars that none of this had poisoned my life. I have never argued with editors about anything. They have always paid me, of their own volition, more money than I thought I was worth, and they didn't ask me to rewrite my fiction beyond the necessities of copy editing (after all, my speed of writing sometimes leads to a certain slovenliness). —Well, one editor did, so I stopped writing for him; there were no arguments over it. And then, to punish me for my smug self-satisfaction, within a week of my having read Heinlein's letters and thanked my lucky stars, I received three (one, two, three) blows designed to elicit grumbles of my own—or not exactly grumbles, either, but wild outcries.

Number one:

Back in September 1989, I was asked to write a mystery story for a magazine that didn't till then publish fiction. I did one and sent it in and they accepted it. They had promised a satisfactory payment and so I recorded the acceptance in my books and waited for the check.

On November 22, 1989, two months after acceptance, I got not a check, but a contract. I don't generally read contracts; I just sign them, since my whole experience with publishers has convinced me that they are anxious to treat me fairly. However, in this contract a phrase in the second paragraph happened to catch my eye. The phrase was "pay on publication." Now it is the common practice of respectable magazines (like this one) to pay on acceptance. In that way, they make an investment in the story and therefore publish it at the first opportunity in order to get some return on that investment. A magazine that pays on publication has the ownership of the story *at no cost to itself* and feels no compelling reason to publish it.

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It can sit in the editorial offices for ten years and the author is neither paid for the story nor has the right to use it elsewhere.

The contract says that if *after a year* the story is not published (and I get not a cent of payment) I have the right to terminate the agreement. I do that by sending a written notice of my intention to terminate and, after that, the magazine has *another six months* to publish the story, and I still don't get paid. Then, if, after a year and a half, the story is published, and I do get paid, I can't use the story for any other purpose for another year. Clearly, the contract was drawn up by a kid fresh out of law school who is under the impression that he is to give his client the maximum freedom of action and the other party no freedom of action at all. The only catch is one that the legal brain of the kid didn't encompass. How do you get a writer to sign such a contract?

I simply wrote a very polite letter to the editor asking if, by any chance, she thought that I was an idiot, and ordering her to send back the manuscript at once. I didn't actually tell her what she could do with the payment, but I think she could guess that.*

Number two:

I was sitting in one of the offices at Doubleday speaking to an editor, when a gentleman dropped by and gave me a big hello, using my first name. I didn't know him, but I don't know lots of people who

*I'm glad to say that the editor immediately sent me a check and promised speedy publication.

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know me. ("I met you briefly at a convention twenty years ago. Do you remember me?")

I assumed he was a Doubleday employee and any Doubleday employee is a friend of mine, so when he asked me to do something for him, I agreed. What he wanted me to do was to write fifty to seventy-five words on the coming decade and millennium that could be used as an inspirational message to the world in general. Well, I have certain subjects I feel to be important, so I wrote the following:

"There are two problems that must be solved if we can face the 1990s and the new millennium with any confidence. First, we *must* have a low-birth-rate society. Population cannot increase any further, or we will crowd ourselves to death. Second, we *must* put an end to the notion of the nation-state, the feeling that in the name of national security, anything can be done no matter how it harms the planet. We must develop a global consciousness. If those two problems are solved or are clearly on the way to solution, then *all* other problems can be handled easily."

It was quite clear to me that this would be difficult to use as an inspirational message, so I was prepared to be told it wouldn't do. However, he called and said everyone loved it, but *one* person suggested a *slight* modification. I asked him to send me the slight modification. He sent it to me and in the covering letter said, "As you can see, we've striven to maintain your thoughts, while making certain modifications that may be politically sensitive for the agency."

I now realized he was not a Doubleday employee but some sort of public relations person. Here is his slight modification:

"As 1990 approaches, I think of how fortunate we are to live in this special time. We are in the final phase of a millennium, soon to be the pioneers of the next. And what will be our legacy? Will it be one of hope? Or one of despair? The answer lies in our openness to communicate, as individuals and nations, co-inhabitants of earth, forebears of the future. As we cause the world to grow smaller, the importance of communication looms larger. Communication begets understanding, the foundation of human progress." The slight modification, as you see, makes no mention of the low-birth-rate society or the end of the nation-state, each of which I consider essential to human survival. It talks about communication but does not mention what we will communicate *about*.

So once again, for the second time in a week, I was forced to write a polite letter asking if the person involved was under the impression that I was an idiot. I absolutely refused to sign the (well, I did describe it, but never mind what I called it) material he sent me and suggested we break off relations forever.

Number three.

A friend in Atlanta sent me an article that appeared in the *Atlanta Jewish Times* on November 10, 1989. It quotes the thoughts of

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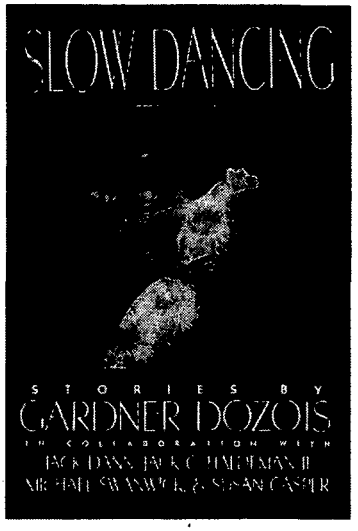

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someone named Charles Jaret who is described as "a Georgia State University sociologist, [who] has made a study of Jews and Jewish themes in science fiction."

Here is something that Jaret says: "Probably the best-known Jew in science fiction is writer Isaac Asimov. But Asimov's connection with Judaism is tenuous at best. 'You'll find more themes in his work that derive from Christianity than Judaism,' Jaret says."

Well, heck, is there anyone who doesn't know I'm Jewish by descent? However, I am not Jewish by religion! I am not anything by religion! As a writer, I write on themes I *feel* like writing about, and not on themes that *someone else* feels I should write about. I am sick and tired of being told periodically, by Jews, that I am not Jewish enough.

I once agreed to give a talk on a day that happened to be the Jewish New Year. It made no difference to me, since I don't celebrate *any* holidays, not Christmas, not the Fourth of July. Every day (365 days a year, 366 in leap year) is a work day.

So I received a call from a Jewish gentleman who berated me for having spoken on the Jewish New Year. I told him I didn't observe it, or any other holiday, but he said that it didn't matter. I was simply trying to hide the fact that I was Jewish.

"Pardon me, sir, you have the advantage of me," I said, "You know my name but I don't know yours."

"My name," he said, "is Jefferson Scanlon." (That's not his real name, but it conveys the aura.)

"I see," I said. "Well, if I were trying to conceal the fact that I was Jewish, the very first thing I would do would be to change my name from Isaac Asimov to Jefferson Scanlon." He hung up with a bang and I never heard from him again.

Another case where I was given the back of the hand for not being Jewish enough was by someone who is listed as having the first names of "Leslie Aaron," but he doesn't use "Aaron" and is known far and wide as simply "Leslie" (plus a last name of course.)

And now I am berated by Charles Jaret (who may be Jewish and probably is.)

I haven't responded to any of this, but again I can ask if they think I'm an idiot. Do they, with their fancy Anglo-Saxon first names, have the gall to imply that I am hiding my Jewishness when I have plastered the name of "Isaac" all over my writings?

And Heinlein thought *he* had something to grumble about.

It wouldn't be fair, however, not to mention a few nongrumbles. The people at this magazine, have, one-and-all, been a joy to work with. I might especially mention Sweet Sheila Williams—warm, dedicated to the magazine with a fervor, and illuminating it constantly with her personality. And by the way, this is the hundredth issue of her stay with us. May she be here for a thousand more. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov, Mr. Dozois, and Ms. Williams:

I am writing to you in praise of Mr. Norman Spinrad. He has written a truly awesome piece of literary analysis in the December 1989 issue of *IAsfm*, "On Books: Far, Far Out." It is obvious that he put a lot of work into this piece. His insights into literary construction are truly mind-boggling. He explains in a very interesting manner, subjects which can be very dry and boring.

Mr. Spinrad came up with a marvelous concept in his sentence, "As you go further and further into the future, science fiction approaches fantasy as a limit asymptotically." Just as a picture is worth a thousand words, a mathematical graph springing into one's memory in response to his words can convey his meaning very succinctly, in a way that ordinary English words could not do. At the same time it makes you sit back and say, "WOW!" in appreciation of his brilliance.

Please encourage Mr. Spinrad to keep up his good work. I look forward to reading more of his literary analyses.

Sincerely yours,

Mary Ann Kahl
Arlington Heights, IL

What I always say is that, agree with him or not, Norman makes you think, and that's a good thing.

Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

First, I love the magazine. It's a mixture of polished and experimental stuff like nothing else.

But what's all this about the death of cyberpunk? What else do you call these new stories by Silverberg and Card? Any genre that produces books like *Schismatrix, Count Zero,* and *Vacuum Flowers* isn't going away anytime soon!

Sincerely,

Joshua Stern
Los Angeles, CA

I don't think that any literary style ever completely dies. Stephen Vincent Benet wrote an epic poem, John Brown's Body, *about fifty years ago, and more recently, a Greek writer wrote a sequel to the* Odyssey *in full epic regalia. And if epic poetry can survive twenty-seven centuries after Homer, I think everything else can survive, too.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I read with interest your November editorial, "Half-Done." I would like to suggest an answer to your

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question, "How long can it go on?" I don't believe it can go on. The world as we know it will end. There are three possible ways.

First, the world will end as described in the Bible, with the second coming of Christ. Although this may be, by some people, a consummation devoutly to be wished, it is in a sense the least interesting of the three, since it is very difficult to extrapolate logically from here to there.

Second, the world will end with a nuclear holocaust. I think a few people would survive even an all-out nuclear exchange. Having no experience with such a conflict, we (the human race) are likely to be clumsy at it. Even so, for the survivors the outlook would likely be very grim—savagery for a very long time, perhaps forever. The average savage would have to depend entirely on renewable resources. Precious (and diminishing) physical reserves of coal, ores, gas, and oil would be reserved for the military forces. Add to that the genetic problems caused by radioactive mutations.

Third, the world as we know it will end because increasing population and diminishing resources are on a collision course. The result will be a gradually lower standard of living. This is the road we're on now. In the U.S. the descent is not yet steep, but it soon will be. We're using our resources like a drunken sailor spends money.

Is there hope? Yes, but we have to evolve into something better. As you put it, there will have to be "an inflection point" beyond which pain and hardship motivate the average man to think beyond the next meal and politicians to think beyond the next election.

Daniel P. Shine
1038 Nimitz Ln.
Cincinnati, OH 45230

My own feeling is that to avoid the second or third possibilities (I don't take the first seriously), it is important that over the next couple of decades we develop a low-birth-rate society, a global society, and a space-centered society. The chances of doing so seem slim but the alternative is what you say.

—Isaac Asimov

Gentlemen:

I'd like to take this opportunity to tell you some of my opinions on your magazine. First of all I'd like to say that I think the magazine is the most excellent source for science fiction on the market. The authors are always interesting and contemporary, and the artwork is the finest I've seen in any genre. I'd like to give my thanks to you, Dr. Asimov and you, Mr. Dozois for providing me with such interesting reading.

A few of the stories the past year have really stood out and I feel their authors deserve praise for them. One is the novella "Pageant Wagon" by Orson Scott Card. Normally, I have trouble with the novellas, but this one held my attention throughout. Another novella is "No Spot of Ground" by Walter Jon Williams. Although it hadn't a trace of science fiction in it, I'd glad that an exception was made. I've never been a fan of raw science fiction anyway. The final story is "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter An-

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other" by Robert Silverberg. Although the title is sort of ridiculous, I found the story very enlightening.

It wouldn't be fair to tell you all about the good stories without reminding you of the not-so-good stories. The first one was "Boobs" by Suzy McKee Charnas. That story was absolutely pointless, plotless, and themeless, not to mention obscene. Another one was "Dori Bangs" by Bruce Sterling. That one pushed my patience with obscenity past the line. I can take a couple of strategically placed swear words but I see no need to distract the reader's attention with them. And finally, "Surrender" by Lucius Shepard (refer to my gripe with "Boobs" if you want to know why).

I've enjoyed reading the letters and Dr. Asimov's responses to them the most out of any of the features. No matter how hard the reader tries to outsmart Dr. A, whether it be about his magazine or about science in general, they can't do it. He is always able to support his arguments with firm evidence.

That's about it. Thanks for your time and keep up the good work.

Derek A. Croft,
Mt. Clemens, MI

For some reason, my faithful readers tend to overpraise me. The truth is that I am now and then in the wrong, and readers point it out, and when I recognize my wrongness (always difficult for anyone) I manfully admit it. On the other hand, professional critics tend to underpraise me and the back of my hand to them.

—Isaac Asimov

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Best Novel
The Healer's War
by Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

Best Novella
"The Mountains of Mourning"
by Lois McMaster Bujold
(*Analog*, May 1989)

Best Novelette
"At the Rialto"
by Connie Willis

Best Short Story
"Ripples in the Dirac Sea"
by Geoffrey A. Landis
(*IAsfm*, October 1988)

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Sirs:

This is probably unnecessary by now, but in case no one has written, Mike Putek ("Letters," Dec. 1989) might wish to know that Ron Goulart has written a number of stories about Ben Jolson of the Chameleon Corps. The earliest that I know of were published in *F & SF* from the mid-sixties to the early seventies. Later, some novels about Jolson were published by (I think) DAW. Latterly, I have picked up three paperbacks under the generic series title of "the ex-chameleon" from St. Martin's.

On a totally different topic, may I make two suggestions for your fine magazine; (actually, I'm about to, whether I may or not).

1.) Despite the outcries the publication of "Peregrine: Perplexed" occasioned, pay or coerce Avram Davidson into writing for you *Peregrine Tertius:* as a writer he is superior; as a baroque comic writer he stands alone. Also, I'm getting older and don't want to wait for treats as long as I was once willing to.

2.) Have you ever thought of asking James Randi to do an occasional column for you? It seems to me that he would be a natural for a fact/debunking column.

Respectfully,

Jack Beifuss
445 Meadowcrest
Memphis, TN 38117

If you don't want to wait for Davidson treats, you must address your complaints to him and not to us. Avram is, unfortunately, not a prolific writer.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I would like to start by thanking you for printing Orson Scott Card's "Dogwalker" (Nov. '89). I enjoyed the story more than any I've recently read. Though it wasn't science fiction per se, you showed why you are the best by publishing such a fine piece. I hope you continue to receive and publish more from Mr. Card.

I have a question concerning poetry in *IAsfm*. Your guidelines for submitting make no mention of what you prefer. Why? I've studied previous issues and fail to discern any similarities in the material that sees print. I look at such poems as Jack Haldeman's "Balanced Scales" (Nov. '89) and walk away scratching my head in confusion. If you were to print a response to this letter I feel those writers of poetry who yearn to make it into *IAsfm* would benefit tremendously. If we know what you're looking for we can better gear our submissions. If there is no "type" of poem you seek then that helps since we know to send only our best regardless of the subject matter.

Again, thank you for supporting poetry and all writing in general.

A future *IAsfm* contributor,

Michael D. Walker
Box Elder, SD 57719

I'm going to leave this one for Gardner to answer, if he wishes. My own tastes in poetry are so primitive and childlike that I'm sure nothing that I say can be of any help to the poets out there.

—Isaac Asimov

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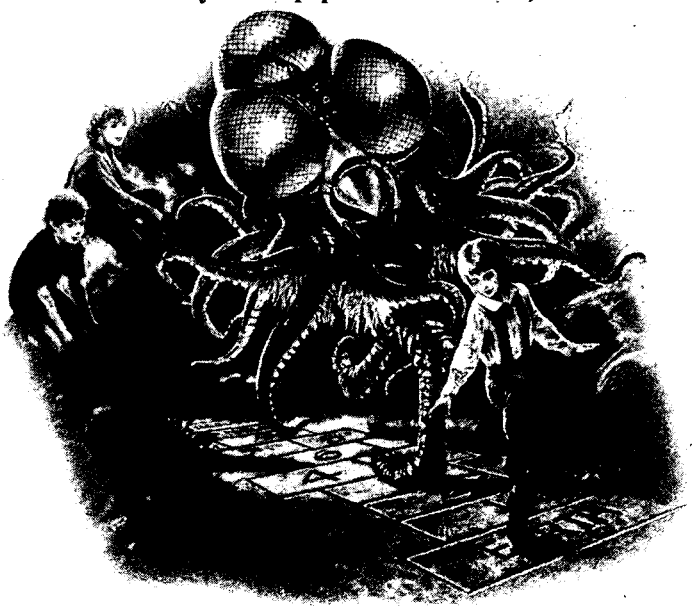

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science, science fiction, and/or fantasy themes. Most importantly, of course, each poem must succeed in captivating us.

—Sheila Williams

Dear Dr. Asimov:

The following letter concerns Theodore Reed's (March 1989) and Gary Fletcher's (December 1989) letters to the editor regarding J.G. Ballard. I'm disturbed by this "Ballard bashing" and feel compelled to respond.

Although J. G. Ballard is certainly not to everyone's liking (what author is?), he certainly doesn't deserve these vitriolic diatribes. Mr. Reed's personal attack on Ballard as "a professor of pus" and "vomitus" is unwarranted. Mr. Fletcher, though less strident than Mr. Reed, notes his "contempt" for Ballard for being "the deliberately obscure 'artist.' " If you do not prefer his writing, fine, but why the invective?

Alas, J. G. Ballard is not as popular in America as in England and France. As an American, I'm embarrassed to point out that these two letters demonstrate the incredibly simplistic, one-dimensional, parochial literary tastes of a majority of Americans. Mr. Reed points out, in a most telling comment, that he prefers "Mr. Ed" reruns.

How many Booker nominations do you have Mr. Reed? Do you have any movie adaptations of your books by Spielberg? Have you been voted the number three all-time best SF author by *Interzone* (July-August 1989) or one of the thirty best all-time authors by *Locus* (September 1988)? Can you write a story like "The Voices of Time"? Can you make a claim to be the driving force behind the New Wave? [no offense to Michael Moorcock's importance intended].

I consider Ballard to be one of the most prominent writers of this century, and not just a premier science fiction writer. I have no difficulty in grasping his "obscure" themes of time, alienation, "inner space," the psychological effects and impact of technology, sex, cars, mass media, and suburbia, to cite a few. Novels such as *The Crystal World, The Drowned World,* and *High-Rise* will only grow in stature with time, outlasting the literary diarrhea of the *TV Guide* crowd.

So reach for your remote control and turn on your television, gentlemen, but I'll opt instead for Ballard. I remain

Sincerely,

George Ware
Dayton, MD

The ancient Romans had a saying: "De gustibus non disputandem," which means "No use arguing over personal tastes." As you say, no author is to everyone's liking. When I think that there are even people in the world who criticize my *writing, I am overcome by a kind of dizziness at the extremes to which vagaries of taste can carry people.*

—Isaac Asimov

Correction:

Due to a printer's error, a credit line was omitted from our June issue. The opening artwork for "The Blue Love Potion" should have been attributed to Laurie Harden.

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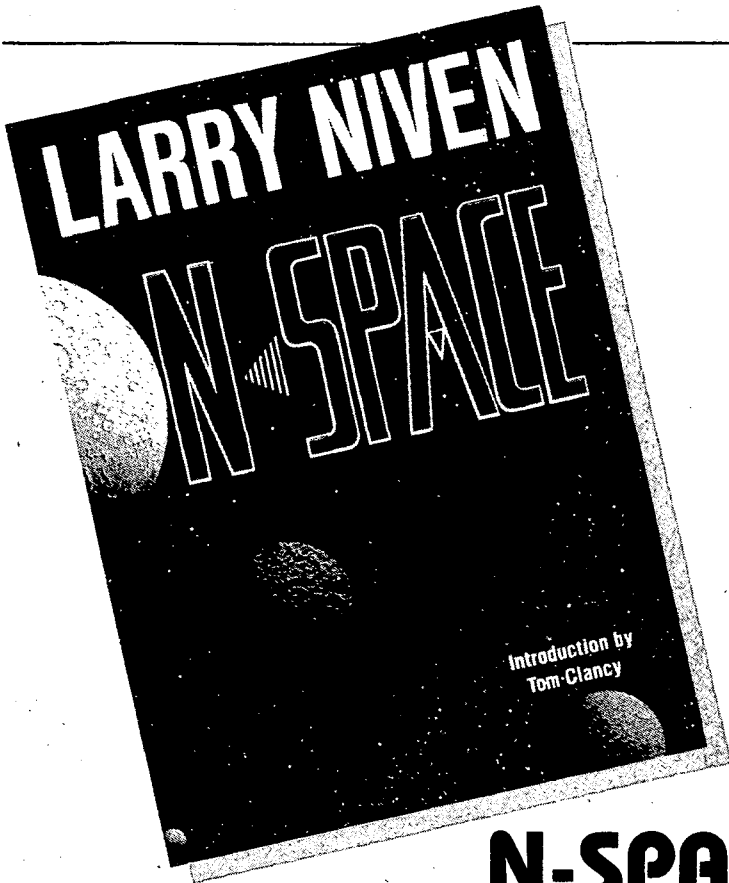

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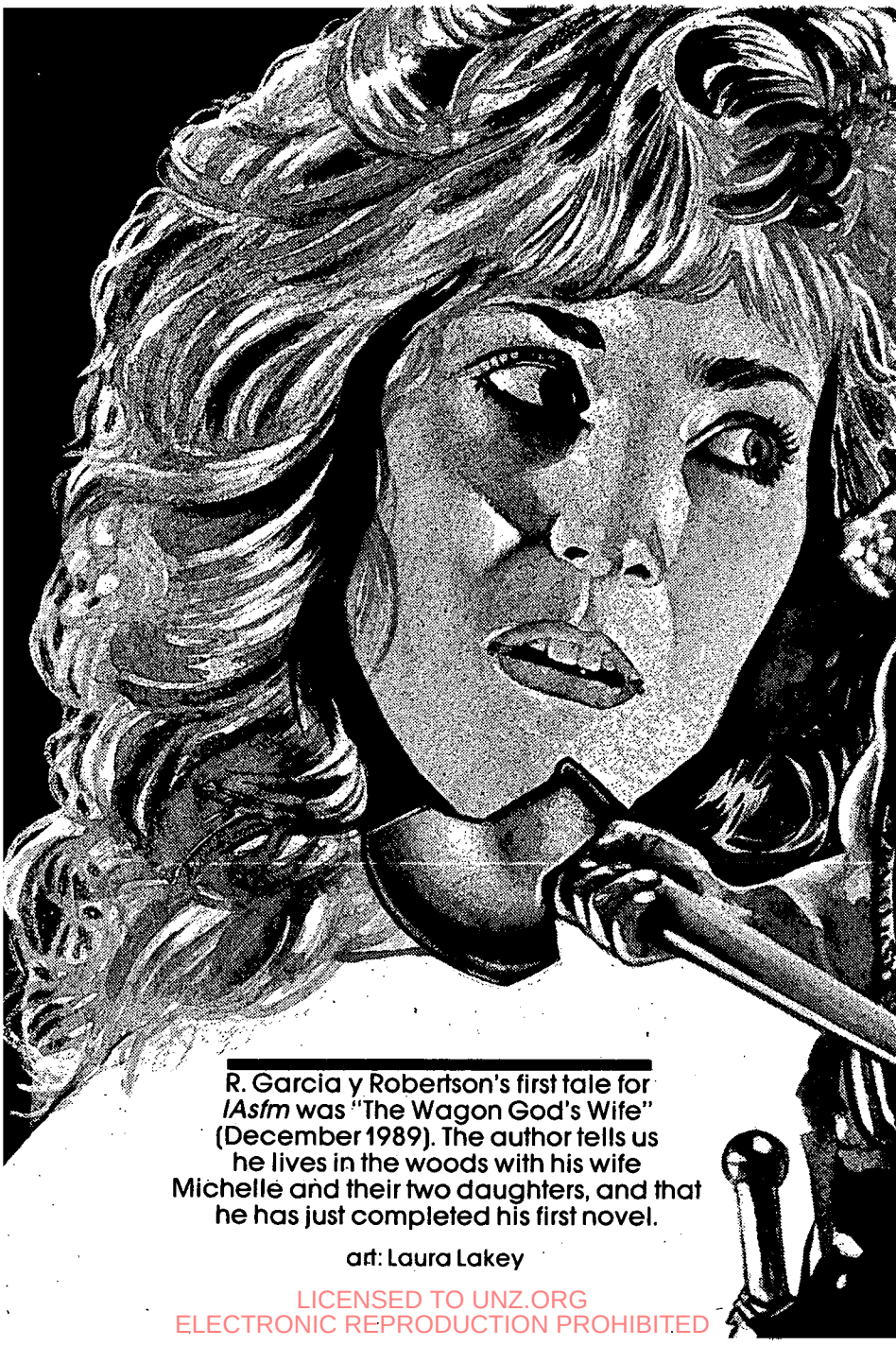

R. Garcia y Robertson's first tale for *IAsfm* was "The Wagon God's Wife" (December 1989). The author tells us he lives in the woods with his wife Michelle and their two daughters, and that he has just completed his first novel.

art: Laura Lakey

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by R. Garcia y Robertson

NOT FADE AWAY

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For Buddy Holly; also for Fletcher Pratt, R. A. Heinlein, R. E. Howard, and H. Beam Piper—who thought the past was not so bad, nor the future as nice as it looks.

Figures on a Flat Landscape

Janet heard the gulls warning her. Gulls are greedy evil-minded freeloaders, always expecting the worst, but she looked up anyway, resting her trowel in the turned earth. Morning mist brushed the grass tops, pressing surf, earth, and fog into a flat stale landscape—pasture, sand-and-gravel beach, mud flats, then the smooth gunmetal bay. Rumpled Maine hills and humpbacked islands hovered in misty distance with no connection to the ground.

Two figures came out of the fog. Hunter and hunted—that image hit Janet immediately. The first figure was slight and staggering, as insubstantial and silvery as the mist. This slim form rose and fell, slipping in the mud, scrambling up the gravel beach, limping through sedge and salt grass. The second figure was farther off, but more substantial, striding purposefully over the mud flats, something long and solid swinging in one hand.

Janet watched them separate from stagnant mist, coming toward her. Overhead, the gulls still wheeled and screeched. She gauged distances and glanced at the jeep, gassed and ready. She could ride out to meet them. See what was happening. Get involved. They were already on family land, and when people ask, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Dad told her the Bible answered, "Yes."

But she hated to drive the jeep around the dig, its heavy wheels churning over Indian homes and grave sites hundreds of years old. Her hand trowel was different. Janet thought of it as respectful, hardly even intrusive, scraping the soil just enough to learn its secrets. Pot shards and arrowheads she took home, but she left the big bone pile up the beach untouched. Dad's land deed did not give her the right to rob the dead.

Feeling almost snakebit, she watched them come on. Up close, the first figure seemed hardly human—a half-crushed mantis, slim and feminine in a silver suit; part metal, part skin. Where the suit was torn, Janet saw pale flesh and red gashes, but the face was a bright mask, with soft hollows marking the eyes, mouth, and nostrils. Gossamer wings dragged over the ground; filmy, shot with rainbows, heavy with mud.

"Jesus!" Janet gripped her sharp trowel, thinking, "I am not prepared for this." The silver insect-person staggered to the edge of the dig, tripped

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on the first trench, flopped forward, pulled herself up, and looked straight at Janet. A shining arm reached out, ending in five imploring metal fingers. The mouth hollow opened wider and a woman's voice said, "Help me. He means to hurt me."

Over the bare metal shoulder, Janet could see the second figure coming on. He was a broad-chested, black-bearded giant. His shaven upper lip showed a straight, grim gash of a mouth, and lanky hair hung down over shoulders you could park a pickup on. He wore a short tunic, leather leggings, and a woolen cloak pinned with a circular copper brooch. In one hand, he held an ax, with a long handle and a wicked curved head. Slow and determined, he came steadily on, like a rough-cut executioner who had come a long way and waited a long time.

Both figures wore bulky matte-black arm rings, but otherwise were as different as two humans could be. Definitely not just another pair of testy Bay State tourists lost in the Maine mud flats.

The silver figure reached up, grabbed the material under her chin, and pulled the mask back over her head. Beneath the mask was a beautiful face. A woman's face. Pale gray eyes, sculpted cheekbones, a long straight nose. Curving lips said, "Please help. He abducted me." She sounded absurdly calm, and might have been asking when the fog would lift, or the best way to get to Bar Harbor.

Janet dropped her trowel, jumped to her feet, and helped the woman out of the trench. The metallic fabric felt cold to the touch, almost electric. Contact was draining, as though the suit drew strength directly from Janet. "Who are you? What is happening?"

"I am Deena. He hurt me. He may mean to hurt me more."

"Come, here, into my jeep." Janet guided the woman through the trenches that scarred the ancient Indian mound, steering her around to the passenger side. Using the roll bar, Deena lowered herself into the green plastic seat—very easy, very professional.

Janet ran around to the driver's side, hitting the horn as she clambered in. The honk startled and rattled her, made her feel stupid. Keys hung ready in the ignition. So far from town, you naturally left your keys in the car. A few more paces and the grim gray giant, who had been coming steadily on, would be beside them. Janet fumbled with the keys, frantic to get the jeep started. The big man did not lengthen his stride nor raise his ax. He moved as if he had all the time in the world.

Silver fingers stroked her upper arm. Panic faded. Janet worked the pedals properly, and the jeep roared into life.

Spinning tires threw mud on the man's leather leggings and woolen tunic. Janet caught a shrinking glimpse of him through the side mirror as she spun away. He stood with his mouth hanging open, beads of spittle

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in his beard, seeming dumbfounded that the machine might actually move.

Bouncing full bore up onto the embankment, Janet could barely find the dirt track, much less stay on it. She felt better once they had the county blacktop beneath them. Spruce and pine turned the road into a green tunnel of boughs and trunks. The silver hand stayed on her shoulder. Janet glanced into the cool gray eyes. Yes, this woman is real. This is really happening. Wind whipped through the open jeep at twice the speed limit, making speech impossible. Slow down. No time to get arrested. Why not? We *need* the police. Time the county mounties earned their tax dollars. This woman had been hurt, beaten, threatened with an ax. She glanced over again. *What* woman? She was transporting a white-haired fairy, with soiled wings and a far away voice. Eastport was a port of entry, and Janet would bet the farm that Deena did not have a valid visa.

Homing instinct turned her off the blacktop, onto Dad's gravel lane and up the dirt drive to the door. She wanted familiar walls around her, a familiar phone to connect her to her father. Skidding over dirt and gravel, she mashed down on the brake; the jeep thumped to a stop when her foot came off the gas. The open A-frame cabin was a hodge-podge of her and Dad's stuff. Kerosene heaters, slickers, and boots hung by the door. Papers and pot shards were strewn over the table, along with oatmeal biscuits and dirty dishes. Rumpled sheets covered the downstairs bed. So, neither she nor Dad were housekeepers. *Mom's* fault for running off.

Janet grabbed the phone and started to punch. Deena asked, "Is that a communicator?" Her voice was light, almost amused, like an old friend intrigued by Janet's new gadget.

"Yes," Janet answered. "I mean, really just a phone, nothing fancy." Standing there, receiver in hand, she realized she could not give a very good account of what a telephone was—wires, relays, recordings, and operators was about the best she could do.

"Please, do not contact anyone." Deena reached out. Again Janet felt the light compelling touch on her arm. The suit seemed to exercise some strange control.

"I was just going to call Dad, my father." She put the receiver down, but did not let go.

Deena invited her over to the table, taking elaborate care not to disturb the mess. "Come sit down. I do not want to complicate your life." She smiled as she said it, acknowledging the absurdity. How could a metal-skinned, rainbow-winged stranger be anything *but* a complication? The natural graciousness, the good humor, made Janet feel that *she* was the guest, stepping into Deena's world. Lifting a white eyebrow, Deena in-

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vited Janet deeper into the conspiracy. "I am not authorized to make large-scale contacts."

Janet laughed, edging on nervous hysteria. "I never thought of myself as a large-scale anything."

"Oh, you are," said Deena, "great-hearted and generous. I needed help and you gave it. I am grateful for that."

Janet's hand remained on the receiver. Her free arm gestured towards the door. "That man. We can't just let him run around loose, dressed like Conan the Barbarian and swinging an ax. Eastport is a small city; people are *bound* to notice."

Both women laughed. The tension snapped in sudden release. The harrowing episode seemed abruptly humorous. Janet remembered fumbling for the keys, and the amazed look on the man's face when the jeep started to roll away from him. She pictured him strolling through town, clutching his ax, still looking for them, while people scattered and locked their doors. "Who was he anyway?" There were a million questions; might as well start with this one.

"A savage," said Deena. "Please talk to me first. You can always call later." She managed a subtle contrast between the brute who had been after her, and the civil behavior she expected from Janet.

Janet let go of the phone, settling down across from her. Deena looked so real and striking, silver hood thrown back, fine-chiseled face still smiling. Reaching across the table, she placed her hands over Janet's. The pose was prayerful, apologetic, and familiar. "I know I must seem awfully weird to you. . . ."

"What, running along in silver leotards with wings, chased by a hairy Schwarzenegger with a huge hatchet? That is not just 'weird.' That is out of this world. Something you see on supermarket stands."

"Supermarket stands?"

"You know. Headlines like, 'Angel Arrives in UFO—Cave Man Invades Maine—Girl Nearly Gives Birth on Beach.' "

Both women laughed again; Deena's giggle sounded like chimes in a light wind. "No, not out of this world, but it is so good to be in. . . ." Deena seemed to search the cluttered cabin for words, ". . . a civilized era."

"Deena, you should just tell me where you come from." Forget the murderous axman. *This* was the real question.

"Actually, I come from right around here."

"No way. I know nearly everyone outside Eastport. You couldn't cut it, not even as a tourist."

"Not here and *now*," said Deena slowly. "I was born a little bit north of here, in what is now Canada. This is the twenty-first century Old Style, isn't it?"

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"Ah, no, not yet," said Janet. "Give us some time. 2001 is still a few years off." Janet reached behind her, took the tea kettle out of its cozy and placed it on the wood stove, still hot from the morning fire. She was not surprised to hear, 'What is now Canada.' Totally in character for Deena. At least she didn't claim to be from Venus or somewhere in Andromeda. Hell, a lot of Frogs and Newfies talked like Canada was not really Canada anyway.

"A few years off," Deena sighed. "Well, he had me. He was controlling the portal, and it was all I could do to break away. Look, the most uncomplicating thing I could do for you is to just get up and leave."

"That would just about drive me crazy," said Janet. She was mortally afraid that she might never know what had happened to her this morning.

Deena sighed again. "I live and work right near here. In what you would call the 'future.' "

"Ah huh. What would *you* call it?"

"Home."

The kettle started to steam. They both ignored it. Deena traced a line on the table with a silvered finger. "Coming here from the beach, we traveled at less than light speed."

"I tried to keep within sight of the speed limit."

Deena put another finger down. "We moved from one point-instant in space-time to another. Moving slower than light, we seemed to travel through space alone. Move faster than light, and your movement becomes time-like. You loose cause and effect, moving between point-instants light could never connect."

"Please don't demonstrate." Janet was convinced that Deena could easily just disappear.

"Don't worry. I wish it were so simple." She shook her head—a natural, familiar gesture that did not seem to have changed much. "Pathways for hyperlight travel must be constructed. It takes tremendous power to open them, but once open, they create their own matter and energy. The closest examples might be worm holes or perhaps superconductors, though the physics is completely different. You do have superconductors?"

"Ah, not on me. Dad says the Feds use them to listen in on our phones."

Deena geared down, "It is like the road we came in on. Some routes are easy, others are impassable."

"And the man with the ax?" To Janet he had seemed pretty elemental, not into worrying about much beyond his personal point-instant in space-time.

"I am an on-the-spot archaeologist, studying primitive peoples in particularly savage periods. We were ambushed, and he grabbed me, making me take him to the portal. Somehow he was able to operate a stolen

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portal key and dragged me to this time and place. I fear he may have been using me to get here."

Janet touched the matte-black ring on Deena's arm. "Portal key, right?"

"How did you know?" For the first time Deena seemed surprised by something in the twentieth century, Old Style.

"We savages have our ways. *He* was wearing one too. Very out of costume. What do you plan to *do* about him?"

Deena looked down. "Hate to dump him on your era, but I am too weak to drop a net on him, haul him back. If I could just get Home, a team could come out and track him down. We have *our* ways, too."

"Can you get home?"

"That is the problem." She raised her shining gray eyes. "I would need your help."

Everything Deena had done and said seemed so right. Janet could not see herself calling the Eastport police and saying she had a visitor from the future. Their notion of helping aliens in trouble was to turn them over to immigration. Deena would land in the hands of the government, and Dad had warned her what would happen then. Damned feds would probably dissect Deena. Janet would end up drugged to the eyeballs in some posh psycho ward as part of the cover-up. No, whatever help Deena was going to get, it would have to come from her. "Like how?"

"I have to get back to the portal, and if *he* is waiting there, I will need help outwitting him. Physical confrontation would most likely not work."

The tea kettle whistled. Janet had never seen anyone she less wanted to physically confront than that grim giant with the ax. Maybe this *was* a job for the Eastport police. Finding two semi-clean cups, she nearly burned herself picking up the kettle, but managed to pour using the cozy. "How do we outwit him?"

Deena touched a silver thumb to her teeth. "First, we leave here. Your vehicle left deep tracks in the sand, and you made no attempt to disguise where you left the hard surface."

Janet set down her tea. "He could come *here?*"

"Not soon," Deena took her hand again. "You came here recklessly fast. But he came for me across fifteen centuries and a wide ocean. Following us here cannot be ruled out."

Janet's free hand moved toward the phone, thinking Dad would know what to do. Then she stopped. What Dad would do was come storming home, his twelve-gauge pump loaded with double-O buckshot. Dad came down on problems like the whole damn Yankee Division. Maybe she should hear Deena out first.

Deena said, "We can lay down a set of tracks that will lead him so far away from the portal that he cannot get back before dark. After dark,

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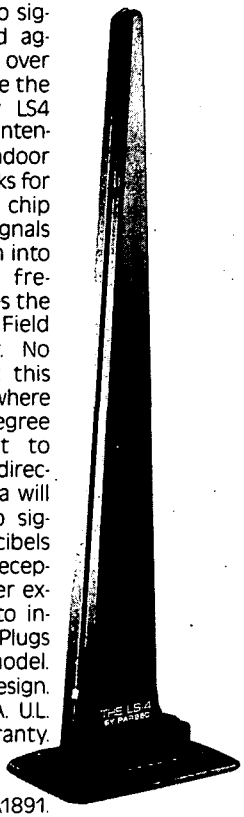

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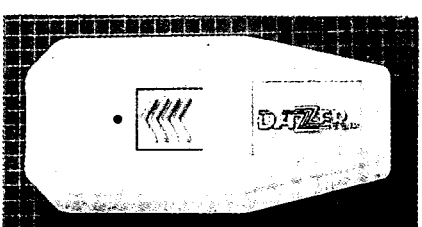

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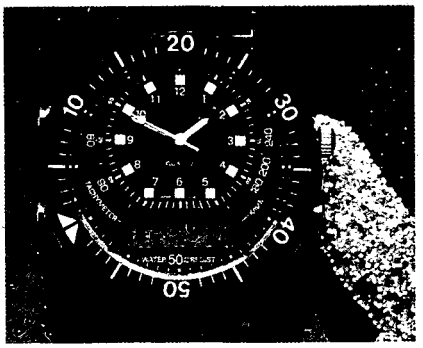

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I will have the advantage on him." She pulled the hood over her head, until the silver hollows covered her eyes. "With this, I can see in the dark."

If courage was grace under pressure, then Deena had it in diamonds. The first part of the plan seemed sound, and the second part suicidal, but Janet was already anxious to make tracks. If she called the Eastport police, it was even money the axman would beat them here. She scurried about, pouring the tea into an aluminum thermos, slapping together cheese sandwiches. She got her down vest and sleeping bag in case she had to spend the night in the open; then tossed everything into her backpack, on top of her mess kit and a one-burner butane stove. She thought about leaving the stove, but it only massed a couple of kilos. This late in the fall, hot tea could mean a lot at night.

Her note for her father said she was spending the night with a friend. She hustled this new friend into the jeep. At the end of the dirt drive, Janet parked on the gravel, and ran back to rake over the marks she'd made coming in. Then it was off into the hills, taking care to hit every soft spot where the jeep would leave tracks.

By afternoon, they were far south of Eastport, almost to Bar Harbor, feeding cheese sandwiches to greedy chipmunks, and watching the sunlight slant through lanes of spruce and silver birch. It had been an exhilarating afternoon. Janet had shaken off any suspicions that Deena was an escapee from some downstate hospital. She truly believed that she was talking with a woman who had seen the pyramids being built, and walked the Bering Strait without getting her feet wet. And seen the far future, too. She felt that every word was helping fill up some of the potholes that Dad and the Eastport public schools had put in her education.

"What are the wings for?"

Deena looked at the limp panes hanging behind her. "Solar cells that power the suit. This suit is a wonder when it is working right—sees in the dark, keeps you warm in winter and cool in summer. Without it, he would have killed me for sure." She had bound up the gaping rents, assuring Janet that underneath the suit was healing her.

"But it can't Phone Home for you?"

"Home won't exist for many centuries." Deena patted the ground, "This is all the world there is, here and now. I suppose I could scratch my message on a rock, giving this exact date. If someone ever *found* the rock, then a team would be here for me."

"Right," said Janet. It sounded like the rock would have to sit there for some time. "What was this 'now called Canada' business? Nothing bad happens to Canada, does it, not in a war or anything?" Dad had

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taught her that most Canadians were honorary Americans, who spoke English but didn't pay taxes.

Deena thought for a moment. "Half of Halifax gets blown up in a World War."

"Ah, I think that already happened. A munition ship exploded there once, and old timers still talk about the boom."

"Then Canada has nothing much to worry about. I guess national boundaries do not mean much to me. We are pushing pathways everywhere, so we border on everyone."

"Christ," said Janet. "It is a good thing I didn't introduce you to Dad. He thinks it is bad enough that we border on *Mexico*. We got a root cellar half-full of canned goods, for when the commies declare a world government, or the Democrats give Maine back to the Indians."

"The Soviets never set foot in Maine, nor do the Indians get it back."

"Dad will never believe it."

"Is your father that doubting?"

"Dad is set in his ways. Won't trust the government since they took 'redeemable in silver' off the folding money. I suppose there is no nuclear holocaust, either?"

"Not that I heard of."

"Damn. We wasted a lot of good time getting ready. Whole weekends in the woods living on berries and herbs."

Deena said, "Your dad seems afraid of foreigners."

Janet picked up a twig and broke it. "Oh no, some he really admires. Take that guy who said the Jews shouldn't live with other people, but should all go somewhere else."

"Your father admires Hitler?"

"No, name was Moses. Dad pinned his picture up. Spittin' image of Charlton Heston, only younger."

Deena looked off between the birches. Finally she said, "And you have lived with him, in that cabin, all your life?"

"All my life. Since turning twenty, the subject is a tender one. I want to go to college, maybe be an archeologist." She wanted to add, "Like you."

Deena did not return her smile. "And your mother?"

"Not since I was four." There was old pain there, but this stranger from the future was easy to talk to, like a census-taker. Mother confessor in a silver suit. As she grew older, Janet had discovered more and more things she could not talk to Dad about. "Mom split on us. Dad took me to work, because she said she wanted a day with just the two little ones, Jim Jr. and Sharon. When we got back there was no note, no apology, no Mom."

"You did not know why?"

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"Not then, not for years. Now I can see how hard she had it—married at sixteen—three kids in four years. Dad thinks birth control is part of the anti-Christian conspiracy. Figures the Lord put all those begats in the Bible for a reason. Mom must have really needed a breather. She was a sort of hippie. They had king hell fights, but Dad says divorce is as bad as abortion. I suppose it was her way of dividing up the family with him." And she didn't want *me*.

"Would you want to see her again?" Deena said it casually, like asking about supermarket stands. "I am looking for a way to repay you. We are very good at tracking people."

Janet sat there, alarmed and astonished. This was more real and personal than the pyramids, or even the future of Canada. Mom dumping her, leaving her with Dad, was a defining part of her life. If she *could* forgive, did she really *want* to see the woman after all these years?

"I cannot change her leaving," said Deena, seeming to read thoughts. "The past is the past. An experienced traveler does not attempt the impossible. That would be like stepping out of a high window to check on the law of gravity. Your life up to now is as it is, but we might find her for you *now*."

It sounded like magic. If Deena wanted to do something for her, should she waste her wish on finding her freakin' mother? She was not some shining-eyed adoptee looking for her "real" mom. She *knew* her real mom was a louse. "Maybe you should just give me a list of winning lottery numbers."

Deena looked like she didn't know what a lottery was. Time travel must have taken a lot of the fun out of them. Instead Deena said, "I really did not mean to complicate your life. Help me get Home, then you can think about it."

This notion of seeing Mom again would not go away. Maybe it was the flat certainty in Deena's voice, so sure she could deliver. Deena might know more about the future than she was saying, but Janet decided not to ask.

They drove the long way round, catching US 1 well to the south, then roaring back up the coast after dark, with the jeep's top up and the windows buttoned down. The closer they got to the portal, the crisper and keener Deena became. Which was good, because heading back to where an ax-wielding maniac might be lurking was having the opposite effect on Janet. The ride gave her time to get a good sweat going.

Deena's silver hand was on her shift arm. "There is really no need to worry. You are safe with me."

"Deena, I don't want to leave here and now."

"No need to. I will go and contact my substation, then return. I can

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even ring the portal with a team before we arrive. You may even see two of me. Do not let it worry you."

"You can do that?"

"It's not impossible," said Deena. "I could *not* just go back to the beach this morning and save myself. That scene is a done thing; something would stop me."

"Like what?"

"Who knows? I just know that I would fail. Besides, rescuing myself would cost me this afternoon spent with you."

They turned off the county blacktop, and Janet hunched down over the wheel, afraid of what might be waiting beyond the headlight beams. Deena had her hood up, directing her, claiming that the blackness beyond the beams was bright as day. Suited up, she was a fairy robot-zombie again. Necessary perhaps, but not exactly comforting. Underneath, she still exuded the cool confidence that had carried them this far. "There, up ahead. That bare stretch of beach."

"This portal seems awfully precarious. What happens if you come out and the beach is underwater?"

"We prefer that. It is safer and more private to come out covered by the surf. This suit can breathe underwater."

An answer for everything. Janet giggled, getting hysterical, imagining the portal left open and the Bay of Fundy flooding the future. Deena didn't seem worried. The hyperlight subway must not work that way.

There was no sign of Deena's homecoming team. Janet pointed the high beams to where Deena said the portal was. In her nervousness, she clutched her backpack, ready to brain any lurking barbarians.

Dad had always tried to interest her in guns. Last Christmas he surprised her with a black-market Colt AR-15, already converted for fully automatic fire. Dad did not believe in Uzis, NATO rounds, nor any of that foreign shit. An AK-47 was goddamn unAmerican. Would *Wyatt Earp* have used a Chinese copy of a Russian gun? Shit no, a Colt was good enough for *Wyatt*. Now she wished she had not made Dad take the Colt back, but the phallic wish-fulfillment was too obvious. Mom had taken his only son and left him with a daughter.

Getting out of the Rover, she heard the surf and saw the glittering Atlantic. No fog now, just a dark wall of pines rearing behind them, and ghostly hollows denting an endless beach.

Deena was striding through the gloom in her silver suit, surveying the blackness. "No one. I guess the savage did not show, so there was no reason to send a team, or. . . ."

Or something fast and horrible is about to happen. So unexpected that no one could stop it. Janet was beginning to understand this point-instant

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stuff. A team would not come just to witness carnage they could no longer prevent.

At the edge of the high beams, Deena looked like a giant silver hood ornament poised on the sand. "You can still come away with me. It would be safer for you."

Janet shook her head. She was not ready for the future; the notion of maybe seeing Mom again was bad enough. "Just come back with that lottery list, or next year's winners at Suffolk Downs."

In her silver mask, Deena already looked far away. "Well, I will be back. To you, it will seem less than a second. For me, it may be a while, so goodbye for now. . . ."

Janet saw a shadow rise up. A huge form surged out of the nearest hollow, sand dripping from its body. In the glare of the high beams, she saw the drop-forged face of the barbarian, all wild hair and black beard. He came right at them, dragging a long handle and gleaming blade.

Panic on all channels. Before she could work up a good scream, Janet was blindsided by a perfect flying block. "Not *me,* you moron! I'm just a *by*stander!" A fan sitting too close to the fifty. Wait! But a numbing impact cartwheeled her into the blinding highbeams. Light and blackness blotted out the beach. Breath knocked out, she knelt in the sand, spitting grit, expecting the ax. A great weight engulfed her, and the high beams winked out.

Feast of the Dead

Suffocating darkness held her in a fleshy vice. Then she was being dragged over hot sand, blinded by bright daylight. Janet could hear waves hitting the beach under the burning sun. *She* was hitting someone, too, hard as she could with her day pack and down bag, but not making much of an impression.

A screen of brush grabbed at her jeans and jacket, then in the cool dimness under the trees she could see again. Through the brush, she made out the humpbacked islands at the mouth of the bay. That was the Maine coast, no error there, but she had a sick feeling she was at a point-instant pretty far from Eastport USA.

Locked in the barbarian's heavy grip, she stumbled over tree roots, terrified because she was far from home, afraid of being with this huge man who could do pretty much anything he wanted. There was no one to help her here; no Eastport police, no army, no national guard, just the dark lanes of the forest. Worst of all, there was no Dad. What a fool she was. The phone had been in her goddamn *hand.* Dad would have introduced Conan the Barbarian to buckshot, but *no,* she had to trust in

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Deena. Have faith in the future. "I will come back for you." Damn, what a dimwit! I deserve what's coming.

By the time they got about to where the county blacktop *should* have been, she was shouting. "Let me go, you freakin' long-hair, barbarian hippie bastard!" But simple English did not work with him. Another illegal immigrant who wanted to paw the women but would not learn the language. Cursing and hopping about was not getting her wrist loose, so Janet held herself at arm's length and dug in her heels.

He stopped, sat down, but did not let go of her wrist. Leaning back against a tree trunk, he looked half the size of a house, a silly satisfied grin on his face. He was as horrible as she remembered from their first meeting, all muscles, beard, and shaggy hair, reminding her of the bikers who came rolling up US 1 from Portland in the summer, crazy on crack, looking for beer and statutory rape charges. The brooch pinning his cloak was a Worm Ouroboros—the world snake swallowing its own rear—a really obscene sign. In that heavy cloak, wool skirt, and leather knickers, he seemed frightfully over-dressed. Janet herself was sweltering, and wished she could free her arm just to get off the down jacket.

The horror of what had happened mounted. It was not just suddenly a hot day, *it was summer*. The air was full of insects, and the sun was impossibly high in the sky. The trees had a full thick growth of green leaves. The *trees*. They were huge oaks and maples, mixed with much taller fir and cypress. The second-growth scrub pines she had grown up with were gone, so was the flat pasture along the beach. She was looking at a climax forest that had taken centuries to grow, or had never been logged out.

She stared back at the barbarian. "Who are you?" If this was far in the past, before the first settlers logged these trees, then what was *Conan* doing here? He was no closer to Hiawatha than she was. If this was far, far in the future, when the forests had grown *back*, then the future was a lot more low-rent than Deena had made it out to be.

He answered her, not that it did much good. His language was a lilting tongue, not French nor Spanish, nor did it sound like any Indian words Janet had ever heard. It was definitely *not* English. That would have been too easy. Yet the words had a familiar, far-off quality, like something she might have heard in a movie. That hardly seemed likely. Dad thought foreign films were part of the anti-Christian conspiracy. She had to sneak around just to see Monty Python. It was a pretty speech though, that did not fit his hairy face.

The familiar, out-of-place ring was reinforced because he kept repeating something that sounded like "Ja-nant," though he could not get the J right, more like "Ga-nant."

"That's right," she patted her chest. "Me Janet, you Tarzan." He had

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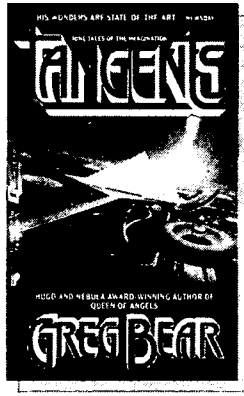

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the muscles for it, but not the cleancut Lord Greystoke look. Did he really know her name? How was that possible? She was dead sure he hadn't spent the afternoon in an Eastport bar, knocking back a few beers, asking the boys who the skirt was who was digging around in the old Indian mound.

He patted himself on the chest and said something that sounded like "Bran." Then he reached over and touched her cheek. That scared the shit out of her, but she did not flinch. He said "Ban" as he touched her. This Bran and Ban seemed to amuse him, because he laughed at his own joke. Well, they were really getting along famously *now*. He seemed convinced they were holding a conversation . . . and might even let go of her arm.

Then he *did* let go, with a shrug that seemed to say, "Okay, go screaming off through the woods if you want." She stood up, almost sobbing, staring wildly about and realizing that it didn't matter whether he held her or not—she had nowhere in this world to *go*. He started spouting more soothing gibberish, trying to comfort her, calling her "Ban Ja-nant." Reaching under his cloak, he got out a kind of leather wallet the size of a handbag, opened it, and offered her something from inside. She was half expecting a hanky, but it was a really ancient piece of beef jerky, worse than the ones you see by cash registers, between the day-old donuts and the rolling papers.

"Do me a major favor," she said, "shit twice and die."

He sat back and started to chew. She sank into a heap a couple of paces off, wiping her eyes.

He held out the half-eaten jerky. She pushed it away. "You know, it is *totally* in character for you to be eating old horse leather. I'm a vegemite, ever since I was thirteen, and I would not eat out of your hand if it held a goddamned New York-cut steak." Who *knows* at what point-instant that cow had died? "There's enough bad karma in that thing to make you come back as a case of hoof-and-mouth disease."

Bran did not look like a browser, so she reached into her backpack and got out a cheese sandwich to show him. Just holding the sandwich made her hungry, ravenous actually, so she bit into it. Her last meal must be centuries gone by now.

As they ate, Janet went through her pockets and backpack, taking stock. She had left well-prepared to stay away overnight. What a laugh. She had one more cheese sandwich, her nylon sleeping bag, a one-burner butane stove, her mess-kit, the aluminum thermos, a small water-proof tin of matches, a pair of rubber-soled boots with velcro straps, her wrist watch, five bucks in folding money, three quarters, two nickels, six pennies, and a "lucky" Liberty head dollar. That, with her jeans and down jacket, was the sum total of the articles of techno-industrial civilization

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remaining to her, aside from her T-shirt, socks, and underwear. If this nightmare lasted more than a day or so, she would go seriously wacko.

She should at least have brought the derringer Dad gave her to take on dates. There was nothing here to protect her—no penicillin, no prophylactics, not even a penknife. If Gonad the Barbarian raped her, she would just have to have his baby, by natural childbirth. AIDS at least was out of the question, and she hoped syphilis had not been invented yet.

The thermos was empty and the stale cheese sandwich stuck in her throat. Bran brought out a hairy waterbag that had once held a goat together. Taking a swig from the skin, he offered it to her. The goatskin had greasy bald spots where it rubbed under Bran's armpit, but Janet held her breath, taking a fast swallow. Just as fast, she spit it out. It was not water. It was something that had once been wine, and was on its way to being vinegar.

Bran laughed. How lucky that she had found a kidnapper so easily amused. He took another swig, then tucked the bag away. Standing up, he pointed, said something unintelligible, and started walking.

Before he had passed the third tree she yelled, "Wait up, apewit, I'm coming with you!" Janet told herself it was not *him* she was following, but the matte-black ring on his arm. That portal key was her sole hope of getting home. Somehow, she would get it away from him, find out how to use it.

The woods were more like a park, with tall trees spaced well apart. In the sparse undergrowth, she saw fat partridges, and a slinky varmint that might have been a pine marten. Farther along, they came upon a big silver-backed wolf. No sober person had seen one in Maine in half a century, but the beast stood there, bold as a bare backside, watching them walk by.

As shock faded, she started to worry about silly things, like leaving the jeep's headlights on. The battery would run down. Well, she had plenty of time to do something about *that*. Batteries would not come along for centuries, and automobiles would take even longer.

They strode through a final screen of trees, and suddenly the land opened up, becoming a combination vegetable garden and stump farm. All but the tallest trees were reduced to charred stumps, between which grew little hillocks of multicolored corn and a yellow-green tangle of sunflowers and Indian squash. Set in the middle of this vast garden was a ramshackle stockade made from thin poles and interwoven branches. Peering over the stockade top were the rounded roofs of long wood and bark buildings.

Janet stood in fierce sunlight, stunned by the strange and familiar. This was the Indian village she had been digging up the day before. The

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shoreline had moved back a bit, and they had come the long way around, but the structures were unmistakable.

A great caterwauling was coming from inside the stockade, people singing and crying at the top of their lungs, but Bran strode forward as if he knew what he was doing. She followed the arm ring. At the gate, Bran grounded his ax and raised his hands, touching their backs to his lips. A group of tattooed old gentlemen with greased and painted mohawks came out to greet them, making little formal speeches that Janet found perfectly incomprehensible. Their stern dignity was marred by their outfits: thin beaded wampum sashes that left their private parts flapping free in the breeze.

Not to be outdone, Bran made an equally undecipherable speech in his own lilting tongue. Convinced that they could not understand each other, the naked Elk's Club ushered them into the stockade. These old gaffers with their polite manners, deep tans, shell earrings, and tattooed tails set the tone for the whole town. Aside from the occasional breechcloth, the bark-and-timber village had the appearance of a punk nudist camp done up for a Halloween party.

Around her, Janet saw an agitated mass of Indians: tearful women, wide-eyed children, skinny dogs, and pet skunks—all staring at her like *she* was the one who looked strange. Welcoming speeches over with, the chiefs made serious attempts at communication. Positioning the pair over some dusty reed mats, the men made exaggerated sitting motions. Janet and Bran sat down. Then the old men made broad pantomimes of eating and drinking, shoveling imaginary food into open mouths with dirty fingers. Bran made a little bow that seemed to mean yes. It was as if he had lunched here before.

Women put bowls before them, heaped with bland but filling corn mush, flavored by meat and dried berries. As Janet ate around the meat, the Halloween feeling was driven home hard. A cry went up. More nude women came trooping in, carrying skin parcels on their backs, and shouting, "Hi-ee, hi-ee." Janet nearly lost the mush she had managed to choke down. Peering out of each skin bag was a grinning skull.

The bags of skin and bones were propped up in rows near the mats, forming a dead bleacher section. Mush was put before this new set of guests. Horrified, Janet sat hugging her legs, having lost all interest in her own meal. The past was becoming a big grisly asylum, with the inmates firmly in charge.

Bran ate like a pig. Smiling at everyone, he traded meaningless jokes with the nude serving women. A couple had their wampum belts slung coyly across their hips. Shameless hussies. They would turn and wag their broad bottoms at Bran as they walked away. At the same time,

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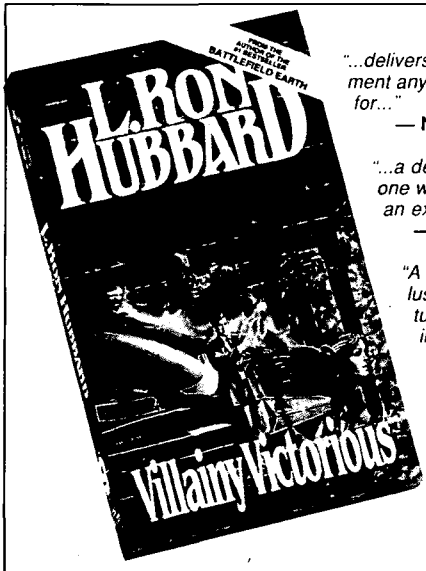

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other women were sobbing with grief, tearing their hair and smashing pottery, making the shards that Janet would one day collect.

This feast of the dead went on all day, though none of the dear departed touched their meat and mush. The air buzzed with gruesome big bluebottles that crawled all over the bodies and over the mush bowls. Some then settled on Janet's food. Let the flies have it. Stunned by the heat and the spectacle, Janet just sat there, quietly going schizo.

Late in the afternoon, they led her into a big cool longhouse, where she collapsed. She had a world-class case of jet lag, having gone from midnight to noon in a matter of seconds. She awoke when the women brought in their dead for the evening. Now the nightmare began again, but she could handle it better. She had slept, and her watch read 10:00 AM, Eastern Standard Time. Janet even guessed where the bones were going. The huge ossuary behind the village site had always puzzled her. How could so many people have come to be buried at once? Well, now she knew.

Wide awake, she saw women turn their longhouse into a godawful morgue. By dim firelight, they cleaned and decorated generations of dead in various states of decay, crooning and sobbing as they worked. Against her will, Janet developed an understanding, an appreciation for what was happening. Women all around her were saying goodbye to parents, children, and lovers they had lost, with compassion and kinship that rot and maggots could not alter. Overwhelmed, she watched women wash their dead, dressing them in furs and necklaces, doing them up like peacocks compared to the rest of the camp. Falling into a fitful sleep, with tears in her eyes, she swore that if she ever got home she would throw her trowel away.

Dawn the next day, Bran was up and ready to march. Who knew where, but Janet was ready too. She had had humdinger dreams that night, and kept seeing skulls everywhere—in dark corners, in the dust, and under people's flesh. The village loaded them with food and sent them on their way.

Heading north up the coast, Bran was in the best of moods, talking to her almost all of the time, unbothered by the language barrier. At their first rest, Janet stripped down to her T-shirt and underwear, wading into the cold surf to wash the charnel-house odor off her body. Curious deer came down to watch. She ate her last cheese sandwich by the shore, carefully folding and pocketing the bag it came in. Saving plastic sandwich bags seemed particularly pathetic, but she was in a world where plastic was rarer than gold. More people passed, headed south, crying "Hi-ee, hi-ee," and carrying bags of dead. The next village seemed almost normal—nothing but painted Indians beating drums, eating dog meat, and dancing naked. They stayed for a couple of days.

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Hiking north with Bran the Barbarian could have been worse, but not much. It was like one of Dad's outback civil defense weekends in the woods, only it went on and on. In a way, it was "The Day After." Time and space had wiped out the USA, right down to the cockroaches, better than the commies ever could. It was depressing to walk where Eastport had been, to get to St. Johns and see the city gone.

Bran must have told her dozens of times where they were headed, not that his explanations made a jot of sense to Janet. As they walked and he talked, she picked up some of his words, mostly connected to the trip. She learned that "aber" meant "river mouth," and "ab" meant "bay." Reasonable enough. Some words were even frustratingly familiar. Bran called the Long Reach a "loch," and "el'an" actually meant "island." But there was no pattern to the similarities that Janet could see. "Mor" meant big, but "bak" meant small. Janet's favorite was "sooigy," which meant a place where they could sit down. She found herself wanting to sooigy all the time.

Janet did not feel strong nor talkative enough to teach Bran much English. She had him pronouncing "Bran is a pigsucker," passably well. Also she taught him "Well screw me," as a greeting, and to say "Let's eat turds," when it was time for lunch. But this was only mildly amusing.

She was also busy having hard thoughts about Deena. "I will come for you." Right. At what point-instant did she plan to arrive? This hyperlight crap could be deceptive. Deena had promised that Maine would never be given back to the Indians. Strictly true, perhaps, but Janet's *personal* future was including a lot of Indians who sure acted like they owned the place. Nothing bad had happened to Canada—it was just gone. For *her,* anyway.

Indians not only fed them, but took them by canoe across the bay to Nova Scotia. Janet could see why Indians were not going to make it in the modern world. They fed and transported this pair of white-skinned strangers, never asking for a tip, never caring that millions *more* of them were going to come and cut down their forests, kill off their game, kill *them,* and drive the survivors away. It was not that Indians were just naturally kind-hearted. Janet witnessed one really horrible incident, when a tribe got hold of someone they considered unfriendly. Made *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* look like *The Muppet Movie.* The most gruesome part of the barbecue-cum-vivisection was that the victim had to *entertain* between acts, singing, cracking jokes at his captor's expense. But neither she nor Bran ever rated a starring role in such a variety show and celebrity roast. For once, Janet was glad the future was securely locked away.

Her only danger came when savages got *too* friendly. One night they slept in a longhouse, presided over by a portly old Pocahontas. In the

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morning, a younger woman came up and signed that granny was sick. Would they stay on an extra day and help with the curing? It was hard to say no, and Bran seemed more than eager to oblige. In colorized Tarzan movies, when you cured some important savage, it made you a sort of white god. Janet did not feel up to inventing penicillin, or even aspirin, but she did know herbs, so she tried to find out what was wrong with the old lady. Pocahontas's daughters signed that something bad had come in her sleep, making it look like nothing worse than a nightmare. The old glutton needed a lecture about not gorging yourself on bearmeat at bedtime.

That evening, most of the young folks assembled in the old woman's longhouse, where she was propped up on a willow back-rest. Boys in breechcloths lined up along one wall, girls in grass skirts along the other—pretty much like prom night without the tuxes. There was a great deal of giggling and moving about, until everyone faced the right person. Janet ended up facing Bran. A couple of chiefs stood by the old woman, shaking tortoiseshell rattles, wailing away like a pathetic local band at a deranged Hawaiian theme dance.

Then the chiefs hit the right note, and all hell broke loose. The boys dropped their breechcloths and the girls lifted their skirts. Leaping into each other's arms, they began to bang away like a herd of bunnies in heat, while the chiefs swung their turtles and the old lady looked on. Disco orgy. Dad said that touchy-feely therapy was a thin disguise for debauchery, but Janet had not believed it until now.

Bran came striding over. Using some sweet words and some rather vulgar signs, he wanted to know if his Ban Ja-nant would like to join in. Janet said "No" so loud that it started a commotion. It became pretty plain that they considered her, at best, a party pooper, and, at worst, someone who wasn't sincere about wanting granny to get well. There were aspects to this "white goddess" bit that Janet had not considered . . . so she compromised. She stripped down to her white cotton underwear, while Bran screwed old Pocahontas's granddaughter, who volunteered to take Janet's place. The rest of the party-goers had never seen white cotton underwear, and seemed to accept that Janet was naked, but not physically equipped for the group therapy session.

The granddaughter looked all of twelve years old, and Janet mentally added child molesting to Bran's rap sheet, just below assault and kidnapping. When Bran was done with little Tiger Lily, he swaggered up to the head of the hall and banged the old lady too, just for luck. This pleased the Indians no end. They signed that grandma was not just getting better, but looking happier than anyone had seen her since she ate her last husband.

Everyone else had a grand time exorcising granny's bad dreams, but

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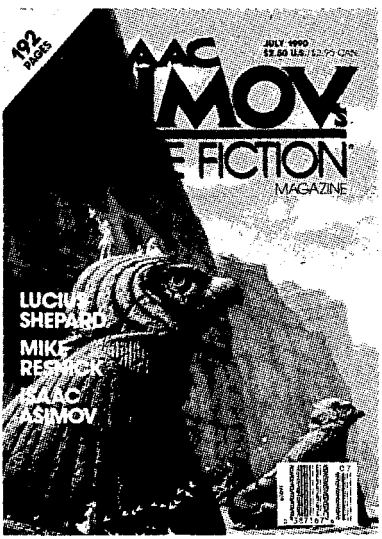

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Janet woke late, eating her leftover mush without enthusiasm. Bran rose ready as a rooster, looking pleased with his performance. "Let's march, Homeboy," she said, walking her fingers and pointing north. She was feeling poorly, and did not want them working cures on *her*.

Somewhere in Nova Scotia, they ran out of Indians, though there had been no shortage up to then. By stages, Janet felt herself running down, out in the wilds, centuries from a pharmacy, much less a hospital. Who needed AIDS in an age when you could die from an impacted molar or an infected bug-bite? The whole weight of space and time pressed down on her. And she was alone with Bran.

It got darker and darker. Sick lassitude pulled at every step, and she was sure they would never make the next village. Bran bowed to her exhaustion. Resting his ax against a tree, he fished into his wallet, saying, "Let's eat turds." Persistent diarrhea had taken the edge off that joke. Whatever bug was eating at her did not seem to be bothering Bran. Real taste and breeding for a bacteria.

Unrolling her sleeping bag, she crawled inside immediately. As long as she was in the sleeping bag, she was safe, since the nylon mummy bag was not big enough for Bran, much less both of them. Lying on her back, holding her belly, she could hear him snapping dead branches, collecting firewood. Flint hit steel. She could see the firelight throwing shadows into the leaves overhead. Then she heard him chewing. Nothing wrong with Bran Flake's belly.

Then she heard the footsteps. Not pad, pad, pad, the way Indians walked, but the heavy clump of booted barbarian feet. They came to a stop in back of her head. She closed her eyes and feigned sleep. Christ, what did he want with a walking corpse like *her*? After seeing him go for that old lady, she guessed he could get off on a nanny goat. Clutching the hem of the bag, she hoped he could not work a zipper.

She heard his soft lilting whisper. Words she did not understand ended in "Ban Ja-nant." Then he knelt down and drove something hard into the earth beside her head. The footsteps went away.

Opening an eye, she saw a knife handle next to her head. He had left it for her. She reached over, gripped the handle, and heaved as hard as she could. The hilt wiggled, but the blade stayed firmly planted. Well, it was a decent gesture. The goon just didn't know his own strength.

She rolled over and watched him fall asleep by firelight; with his broad shoulders and long hair, he lay down like a sleeping lion. So he wasn't a rapist. Maybe he even had his good points. He was still stupid. How did he know his Ban Ja-nant would not take his knife, slit his throat, and walk off with the portal key? How did he *know*?

Next morning, she fixed herb tea. Despite the banging around, the butane stove was holding up better than she was. She should write the

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company, carve her thanks on a solid-looking rock. Today's flavor was wild raspberry; supposed to be a tonic, but Janet doubted that it would do either of them any good. It worked on the uterus; hers was okay, and Bran did not have one. It's the thought that counts.

He woke, sat up, yawned, looked at her, and smiled. "Well screw me, Ban Ja-nant." She handed him his tea, "Sorry, Sir Galahad, you had your chance."

She did not lose her chastity in Nova Scotia. That had happened in the back of a Portland pimp's Buick Electra, during a particularly thrilling point-instant in her life. "Not Fade Away," by someone named Buddy Holly, had been playing in the background. (Or it *would* happen, once mag-wheeled Buicks, with tape decks, bunny decals, and condoms, came along.) She did lose her vegetarianism, though. At the next village, she gave in to flesh. Not just any meat either, but boiled venison floating in gobs of fat and deer hairs, with tongue and brains as a side dish. Her body craved it. She sucked Bambi's bones to get at the marrow. After a day or two, her diarrhea got disgusted with her and left. There was something in fatty deer meat that she was just not getting from corn mush.

Janet had been a vegetarian ever since a bald guy in a saffron gown at the airport had given her *Higher Taste: a guide to gourmet vegetarian cooking and a karma-free diet.* She'd read it cover to cover, including the recipes, and it had made an impression. Since it was written by some foreign swami, she'd had to stash it under the floorboards upstairs, along with her copies of *Cosmo* and her old photo of Mom with the babies. The book was full of foreign names, like Gandhi and Thoreau, and Dad said that the yellow dresses and shave-cuts were just a cover for hanging around airports, watching who got on and off the planes. The government probably slipped extra payments into their welfare checks. Did you ever see any of those shaved heads cutting timber, or pumping gas?

She still believed what they and Swami Prabhupada had to say. "You are what you eat" . . . but who wants to come back as a bowl of corn mush and berries?

Relying on the kindness of meat-eating strangers had its bad points. If Indians *really* liked you, the fare was bear meat and bow-wow burgers. Puppy dog was a special delicacy, because they loved their dogs. Women would feed puppies right out of their own mouths, just like they fed their babies, chewing up the meat first, then inviting the puppies to french kiss—laughing at the feel of the little tongues in their mouths. Getting rabbit meant maybe you should hit the road.

The next tribe paddled them across the Cabot Strait to Newfoundland. There they went through a second portal. The portal was on a small hill, with no special features. If Bran had not started fiddling with the portal

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key Janet would not have known what was going to happen. When he was ready, he held her close to him, twisting the arm ring. Suppressing an urge to break free and flee, Janet watched his every move. Blackness closed around them. She could feel his arm about her. His fingers were on his wrist. Janet realized he was timing the movement with his pulse, and looked down at her watch. The digits glowed in the dark. She guessed that a hundred and eighty-seven seconds went by; not exactly, but that was at least as accurate as his pulse.

He twisted the ring again, and the world returned. Not quite the same world, though. They were still on a hill, but the grass was greener, and the trees had changed. The air was colder, damper, the sky overcast. It was no longer summer. Had she been home, Janet would have said it was early spring.

But which spring was it? Janet did not expect that they were back in the twentieth century, Old Style. She couldn't ask Bran. That trick with his pulse proved that he could count, but who knew what calendar he used; probably the moon and the stars. She tried to remember everything that Dad had taught her about the stars. The precession of the celestial pole might tell her what millennium she was in. Fat lot of good that would do.

Feeling farther than ever from home, she trudged along behind Bran. By late afternoon, she could smell the sea, and when they broke out of the woods, she got a sweeping view of a bay, and saw something that gave her hope. On a small elevation just above the water was a settlement of rectangular buildings with peaked roofs. No Indian had built them, and if she needed further proof, there was a ship riding at anchor in the bay.

As they walked down the path towards the beach, dozens of possibilities passed through her head. The settlement looked European, but old, very old. The houses were made of peat and timber, with stubby little chimneys. Blue smoke trailed upward, into a bluer sky. The thick peat roofs slumped and sank, eaves almost touching the earth. The ship was double-masted, with a tall main mast and a smaller raked foremast. She had heard of Viking settlements in Newfoundland, but this was not a Viking ship. Who came here first? French? English? Who was Cabot? She had just crossed a strait named for him. Even if these were the first settlers, she was still centuries away from home.

As they crossed a small stream on a rude log bridge, Bran gave a yell. People poured out of the houses. Weather-beaten women and big gawky men came rushing up to greet them. They were all dressed like Bran, in leather and homespun woolens. Crowding around, they slapped Bran on the back, and called her Ban Ja-nant, though underneath the familiarity they seemed a bit in awe of her.

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Who *were* these people? Where did they come from? They were white people, with beards, pigs, chickens, everything, but they were definitely not Pilgrims. No guns, no Bibles—just bows and harps. She gave up wondering and let them sweep her up. They feasted her, and for the first time in months she had real food—if you call pork and greens, fish fillet and oat-cakes real food. They ate with their fingers and marveled at her mess kit. That night she spread her nylon bag before a fireplace, on the dirt floor of a half-timbered house.

At dawn, everyone was up and getting ready to leave. She got the strong sense that they had been waiting for Bran and her to show up. Not for the first time, she felt rushed without knowing why. But this time it was different. Instead of Bran dragging her about—threatening to abandon her in exasperation—women descended on her, smothering her with the kind of female affection that Janet had not known since she was four. Branwen, a big woman who seemed to be Bran's mother, took her in hand, cooking her breakfast, showering her with gifts. She got a wool cloak, a dyed green leather jacket with copper clasps, several wool skirts and linen shifts.

Helping Branwen was Gwyn, a slim red-haired teenager with worshipful blue eyes. She seemed to be Branwen's daughter, which would make her Bran's sister. Branwen was motherly, but Gwyn was outright reverent, serving her, helping her to pack. Ban Jan-nant was everyone's favorite daughter. Women gave her things. Men bowed and touched their forelocks. It felt so good to be so cared for that she nearly cried.

They sailed with the first outgoing tide. The ship had a great curving stern, carved like a swan, and a goddess for a figurehead. The mainmast towered overhead, held upright by forestays thick as her wrist, and supporting a yardarm broader than the ship was wide. Janet saw bright giltwork, painted molding, red topsails, and a deckhouse with curtained windows and little balconies. The whole huge vessel was steered by a small balding man, who moved big twin rudders with a tiller no thicker than a stick. When the wind shifted or the ship veered, he would spit and say something sharp in a strange tongue that sounded like Spanish, or maybe Italian.

Branwen and Gwyn brought her to a great cabin on the port side of the deckhouse, painted with flowers and griffins. From the second-story balcony she watched Newfoundland sink under the horizon, swallowed by bottle-green sea. The bed was big enough for holding naval maneuvers, and had a cover of martin skins, bordered with white ermine. She could hardly think that she was supposed to sleep there alone.

But it was Branwen and Gwyn who tucked her in. Gwyn explained with signs that she would sleep outside the cabin door. If Ban Ja-nant should want for anything, she had only to call out. Branwen made a

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longer speech, more motherly, then gave Janet her last gift. It was a thin double-edged dagger, with wild horses embossed in silver on the blade. She showed Janet how it fit in a boot scabbard, then tucked it under her pillow, so that Ban Ja-nant should fear nothing now that she was with them. They put the nylon bag in a sea chest, and she slept warm and secure under mountains of fur.

Mornings, she saw dolphins leaping in their wake, and evenings, she watched the sun set through her balcony windows. In mid-ocean, they struck a storm, a terrible Atlantic gale left over from winter. Frightened, Janet put on a fur cloak and went on deck, finding that only the red topsails were set and that the tall mast inscribed huge circles in the mist and rain. Spray lashed her face as she saw stout lines part and red sails rip. Nothing seemed safe or solid.

Bran was by the tiller with the balding helmsman. Gray Atlantic rollers came curling up over the swan-shaped stern, drenching them with salt water. The little man was running on in his excited tongue, a bantam-weight Chico Marx on speed. Bran offered Janet an arm. More afraid of the storm than him, she huddled under his wool cloak, finding Bran's bulk comforting. Holding his waist, she watched the waves crash, seeing the ship dance upon the wild sea.

Bran's feet were spread wide, planted firmly on the deck planks. Then she felt his hands shift and his fingers touch the opposite wrist, taking his pulse. He twisted the portal key on his arm and the storm disappeared, suspending the huge ship in blackness.

She felt him twist the ring again, bringing back the sea and the sky. The storm had slackened, or been replaced by a much milder one. It had been dusk, but now she could see the red line of morning ahead of them. Under torn topsails, they were sailing into a new day on a more hospitable ocean.

Across the Wide Ocean

Janet stood on the packed earth-and-stone parapet of the keep, wrapped in a fur cloak and wearing a crown of flowers, staring out over gray Ocean. The keep topped a tall mote connected by a wooden bridge to a big stockaded bailey. Below her, hedgerows and bouldered hills fell steeply towards the sea. Rocky headlands reached out into a bay, enclosing the ship she had come in.

She was sure this was Ireland. It was a big green island across the Atlantic from Newfoundland. Bran and his family had a lot of names for it. The most common sounded like "air," but meant "earth" and "mother." She was learning the language.

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Ireland was somewhere in the Dark Ages, Old Style. Bran said there was a High King, name of Arthur, across a smaller sea to the east. He did not count for much, because here every half-penny lord was a king of sorts. Tonight she was being feasted by the local kinglet, whose name sounded like a sneeze. Everyone claimed to be Christian, too, but that didn't count for much either. She had seen Easter services farther to the south, in a kingdom called Munster. The services were a kind of free-for-all fertility rite and drug orgy. A mob of naked long-hairs on mushrooms, humping away in the name of Jesus. Catholics could not have done it worse.

Bran said they were almost home now. She was already starting to think of it that way. She had lost all but one of her sandwich bags, and halfway across the Atlantic her stove ran out of butane, so she chucked it into the Gulf Stream. There was no chance of getting it refilled, and she was not going to lug it around as a two-kilo keepsake.

She no longer thought of herself as missing. No longer imagined her face on milk cartons. Here the milk cartons were brown and white and made mooing noises. No one missed her, because Maine did not exist. It was Avalon to Bran's family, home to the Indians. Hell, she had to be born and live for twenty years before anyone would miss her.

"Ban Ja-nant."-Gwyn had come up on tiptoe in a hooded cape and calf-skin boots.

"I know, the food is ready. I only came up to see the sea." She said it in English, but that did not matter. Gwyn understood. The girl was kindness itself, the adoring kid sister she had lost when Mom took Sharon. Gwyn put a light arm around her waist, whispering the new word that meant love, guiding her towards the bridge that led to the bailey. Ahead, Janet could hear snarling dogs and drunken singing. The party-hearty huntsmen were home from the hill.

Branwen met them at the foot of the bridge, and fussed with Janet's cloak, getting it to drape just right. Gwyn adjusted the flower crown. Their caring circle closed around her, and, one on each side, they walked her to the wooden hall hung with immense elk antlers. Both women were so proud of their Ban Ja-nant. Branwen wanted to be her mother, and Gwyn her sister. Janet called them "mother" and "sister" in the tongue she was learning. They would answer to no other names.

Not that Janet minded being mothered. She was realizing all she had missed, growing up with only Dad for family. Her old life in the woods, digging up dead Indian homes and preparing for the holocaust, seemed a strange, distorted existence. Here and now was becoming reality.

When she entered the hall, even the fat little kinglet rose from his oak throne and raised a goblet. He was half-foxed already; so was Bran, but he held his wine better. A gutted ox, with feet and tail, turned on a spit

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above the fire trench. A true organic ox—no steroids, pesticides, nor testicles.

So King Gyfeochu was a wino with a crown. So his bailey was a barnyard. The feast was still in her honor, and everyone from lord to swineherd treated her as royalty, as more than human. Gaffers bowed their heads, and handsome blades bent double. It was unnerving, but nice. Even intoxicating.

After the wine, the ox, the pheasant, and the tumblers, Bran asked for a harp. They brought him a fine ivory one, studded with gold. Sitting on a bench, one strong leg bent, Bran tuned the harp, smiling at her. Bran had a deep, rich baritone. He came from a line of king's sons, in a land where song was as much a mark of kingship as balling and drinking. Janet did not know half the words in his songs but that did not matter. The songs were all the same, all about brave men and magical women. The Ban Ja-nant was one of these women. She had come through Faerie from the Land Beyond the Western Isles. She had lived among the red-skinned Elves of Avalon. When Bran sang, people believed it. Even Ban-Janant herself half-believed it.

She knew that to him Ban meant "the fair and lovely," because that was how he used the word in song. She drank from a magic silvered bottle that kept spiced wine hot on the coldest nights. On her wrist was the glowing rune crystal that ticked off the moments of the day, even in the dark. But currently Ban Ja-nant was under a bad enchantment, so folks, don't expect much more in the way of miracles.

She also knew that they had come for *her*. Crazy as it sounds; Bran, Branwen, Gwyn, and the others had all deliberately set forth over the Atlantic, through time and space, to get her. It had been an epic voyage, crossing the World-Circling Ocean, finding the magic portals, befriending the Indians, capturing Deena. *Years* of quest had led to that day on the beach near Eastport. Bran had been after *her* that day, not Deena.

Why me? No one could explain that yet, not in words she knew. She was just the Ban Ja-nant, who Gwyn worshiped and Bran loved. It sounded like a huge hyper-light misunderstanding.

Tonight, Ban Ja-nant drank from a plain beaten gold cup, and eyed Bran across the fire. *She* might not be magic, but Bran *was* brave. She had been beside him battling Atlantic gales and wreckers off the coast of Cork. She could do worse. Here and now, she could hardly do better. He just wanted to love her night and day—a love to last, so the songs say.

By midnight, the clouds had cleared. They were rowed back to ship by a pair of potted oarsmen under a great sea of stars. She sat in the bow with Bran and Branwen, sharing a thermos of spiced wine, still magically

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warm. In the darkness, she could feel his strong form, hear his open laughter.

Bran had that Portland pimp beat from the word go. Janet had found out pretty quick that the pimp was just busy breaking her in. Another prick with a head for business, and an eye for rural talent—probably be a senator some day. Bran was respectful, had already taken her to meet his family. His mother treated her like a daughter. Everyone else treated her like a queen. It was not so bad being the Ban Ja-nant, but it nagged at her that she had done nothing to deserve it, that these people trusted her much too easily. She hit the spiced wine harder.

Her head was swimming when they reached the ship. She was deliciously drunk. Decidedly amorous. Bran fetched his own harp, and made more music for them. Gwyn had great red handfuls of hair, and Janet brushed it by torchlight. She watched Bran's strong fingers at work on the strings. The music told her how it would be. His bouncing old Pocahontas and Princess Tiger Lily was not really so bad. Not just inane lust anyway. It was *therapy,* for Christ's sake, a friendly diplomatic gesture.

Later, she lay on her big coverlet trimmed with ermine. Oil lamps gave the beamed ceiling a gold glow. The music still floated through her head, fading at first, then louder, closer, the harp seeming almost in the cabin. Curtains parted, and she saw Bran was on her painted balcony. She giggled. The *balcony,* she could barely believe it! Maybe in the Dark Ages that was supposed to be original.

She waved and he came in, still strumming, sitting down beside her on the big furry bed.

It seemed inevitable really. One day, or night, it had to happen. She could not resist the pull of this family, the mother and sister she had missed. Everything that had come before was fading away. She wished things could wait until she understood more, until she knew *why* all this was happening, but maybe you never knew that.

Bran stopped playing, set the harp aside, and smiled at her. "Well, screw me, Ban Ja-nant."

She giggled again. "I guess I am going to."

He looked puzzled, but ready. She reached up, unpinning his brooch, that obscene snake sucking itself. His cloak fell to the floor and he gripped her. They rolled about fully clothed, the boat rocking beneath them.

She found that funny, too. "Keep your crotch together, Conan. Let me get my damned boots off." Kicking her boots off and tossing them aside, she felt the dagger in her boot scabbard. The one Branwen had given her, chased with silver horses. Some protection, Mom. Well, hell, Branwen had done her best to make Ban Ja-nant feel safe.

She never got all her clothes off. Bran kept stroking her, using the

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word Gwyn had whispered, the one that meant love. Then he was inside her, so hard, so strong. Natural childbirth, here we come. A line kept going through her head about love being bigger than a Cadillac, but she could not remember where it came from.

Janet awoke long after midnight. Oil lamps still burnt, and Bran's big body snored beside her. She felt alarmed, dizzy, but cold sober. Lifting his arm, she slid off the portal key. The fur coverlet lay tangled on the floor. Wrapping it around herself, she stepped out onto the balcony. Curtains rippled with the offshore breeze, and she smelled the heavy salty odor of the sea. The huge swan stern rose empty under the moon, blocking out the stars.

Bracing her back against the deck house, she breathed deep, in and out. Was this how it would be? She would live her life here, with Bran for her lover, Branwen for her mother, Gwyn for her sister. So strange. She turned the heavy portal key over in her hands. When they could talk more, she would make him teach her to use it. Even then, would she ever go home again? Dad and Eastport seemed as far off as Faerie. No wonder they thought their Ban Ja-nant was so special. Whoever she was.

She must have dozed off. When she awoke, she saw a silver figure under the great curve of the stern. Deena was standing before her, hood thrown back, looking human. "I said I would come for you."

Janet gripped the portal key. "Jesus Christ, Deena. You have a terrific sense of timing."

She gave Janet her apologetic look. "This was the first point-instant I could fix a pick-up. That portal near Eastport is too dangerous. He had set traps and ambushes, like the one I fell into. I could not discover which period he exited in, so I came here to Ireland. Sooner or later, he had to come home."

"He brought me the long way around, through Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and God knows where. Damn it, Deena, you took so long. I just. . . . *We* just. . . ."

"I took no time at all. I came here, saw the ship, and you came out, so I released an anesthetic. They will sleep until morning. You just got the antidote."

"Right. If you had come a point-instant sooner you would have got us both, attached at the crotch."

Deena laughed again, like chimes in the wind. "I hope passion does not sway you. You are coming back with me?"

"Damn, Deena. I just decided Bran isn't so bad. I love his family. They love me. He just gave me my best bedtime tucking-in since I discovered boys. And here you are saying, 'Let's go, Janet, it's pumpkin time.' Shit." She shook her head, pressing her palms hard against the balcony rail, trying to make sure this was happening.

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Deena gave her the old cool smile. "Do not let me complicate your life. Stay here and have his babies—until you die of it. Be old by the time you are thirty, maybe dead by forty."

Deena was right. No matter what, how could she stay? Branwen had borne children and lived past forty, but Branwen was a pillar of strength. Janet felt like a pillar of shit. She had lived for months in fear of dysentery, appendicitis, or even a toothache. She had seen Dark Ages dentistry. No novocaine. No lectures on flossing. They got you drunk, held you down, and pulled the tooth with iron pliers.

"Okay, I'm coming." She slipped back into her cabin to stuff her pack, trying not to look at Bran sprawled on the bed, still snoring like a shanghaied sailor. She was betraying Bran, and Branwen, and Gwyn, without even a goodbye note, since none of them could read. She left the fur coverlet, taking only the green jacket, her best dress, the boots with Branwen's knife, and the wallet Gwyn had made for her. Let them have everything else. Janet felt like enough of a jerk already.

Still ashamed, she offered Deena the portal key. "Keep it," said Deena. "You got it back from him, and I owe you for that, too. I will show you how to use it."

Then it was over the rail and off. The great thing about going with Deena was that even in the Dark Ages Deena damn well went first class. Alongside the ship was a half-submerged submarine that Deena called the *Krakan,* looking like a gray plastic Loch Ness monster awash in the bay. A smooth-humped hull supported a slim brontosaurian conning tower with a periscoping neck.

Within everything was warm plastic, that felt soft to the fingers and gave in to the touch. Deena could not resist a little lecture. Silent propulsion turned seawater into power, giving off oxygen. No propellers. Sonar-absorbing hull. An underwater shadow, the *Krakan* had Das Boote beat all hollow. Deena had touched bottom in the Philippine Trench, and gotten close enough to clanky old nuclear subs to hear the crew jerking off in their bunks.

The only crew aboard the *Krakan* was a hulking gorilla that Deena called a SuperChimp. The ape scared Janet shitless the first time she saw him, but Deena squeezed her hand. "Do not be afraid. He is mind-locked to me. Cannot possibly disobey." She waved the chimp away, giving Janet a sly smile. "The one thing we are short of at Home is people."

"Why so?" Janet watched the chimp shamble off, filling half the corridor. "You said there was no nuclear war."

"No war, but population growth has been running below replacement. With all of time to explore and enjoy, we never have enough time to have

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babies." She patted Janet's belly. "I am hoping you are pregnant. Want to check?"

"Ah, not right away. One mindblower at a time is about all I can take." She did not want to be pregnant, and it sounded like Deena was not taking her straight back to Eastport.

Right now, she was happy just to wallow in civilization, New Style. Being on a balanced diet again was marvelous. No dead animals in *Deena's* kitchen. She ate yeast cakes, rice cream, exotic cheeses, preserved fruit, freeze-dried vegetables that sprang to life in the pan, and twenty-eight flavors of tofu. Swami Prabhupada would have had a karmic orgasm. Deena showed her how to run the *Krakan*'s kitchen, and soon Janet was cooking for both of them.

A couple of days out to sea, they passed through the mid-Atlantic portal that Bran had used. Deena said it was their largest, for transporting oversized loads. She showed Janet how to use a key to detect the portal and time the transit. Deena insisted on just a short hop, to the end of the Dark Ages, "tenth century, Old Style." She had business in the Orkney Isles.

They cruised back along the Irish coast, which looked little different after four centuries, same dense woods and dark keeps. The pace of life in the Dark Ages was sort of slow. Off Northern Scotland, in Fair Isle channel, they rendezvoused with a red longship, carrying a grinning dragon's head on the prow. The crew were typical big, beefy Viking types, none of whom leaped overboard when the *Krakan* surfaced, so Janet guessed that they had done business with Deena before. They even looked respectful when Deena came aboard. Wearing her silver fairy suit, she was enough to make the stoutest Viking sit uneasy at his oar. Janet saw crew members crossing themselves, or making little hammer and evil eye signs with their fingers, getting the attention of various gods. In her wool dress and green jacket with the copper clasps, she felt almost normal.

There were women and children aboard, which surprised Janet, since she had never heard of Vikings taking their families to sea. They sat in a morose knot abaft the single mast, too scared or seasick to do more than hug each other.

The longship sailed into the North Sound, docking in a harbor full of fishing skiffs and tubby merchant *knorrs,* where the men herded the women and children ashore. Deena said that the Orkneys and northern Scotland was part of Norway, here and now. She was on good terms with Jarl Thorfinn Skull Splitter, who was related to Aud Broadbrained, Ketil Flatnose, and all the best folks in Norway.

The market was exciting in a gross fishy sort of way. Flies buzzed about open stalls where gutted cod rotted in the sun. Just looking at the meat and vegetables was almost enough to give Janet diarrhea. Piles of

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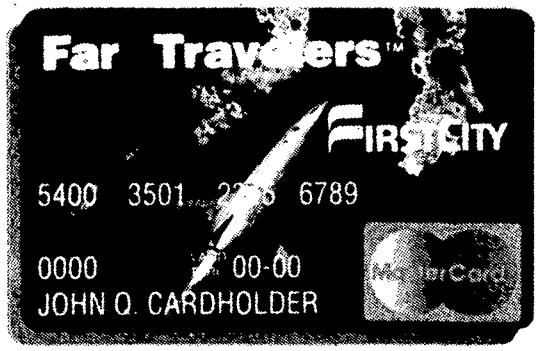
The Shape of Things to Come



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artifacts lay everywhere—brass bowls, pottery jars, bolts of cloth, rings, pins, swords, mail armor—most of it must have been stolen, because the little fishing town could not have produced a tenth of it.

Janet's wallet was full of Roman coins that Branwen had given her. Feeling a guilty compulsion to spend them, Janet started buying absolute junk—strings of glass rubies, rings turning green where the gold had rubbed off, "Far Eastern" pottery about as Chinese as crocks from K-Mart, a circular copper brooch that reminded her of Bran. It was the Worm Ouroboros swallowing his tail. No one cared that her gold was stamped with some dead Caesar's head. They gave her change in silver Byzants and big copper pennies.

Then they came to the slave mart. The men from the longship sat the women and children down among the other vacant-eyed human merchandise. Janet realized that they were not just brawny thugs, but slavers as well. At that point-instant, the exotic, smelly excursion turned truly disgusting.

Deena indicated that she wanted two women, both mothers with babies.

Janet felt sickened. "What are you doing?"

"Saving them," said Deena. "Here they are mistreated. We have what you might call an immigration quota, and can admit some unfortunates from the past."

Janet looked over the people waiting to be sold—boys, grown men, some women with children. She guessed the old people were not worth the cost of feeding. Sitting hunched by herself was a wide-eyed girl with flaming red hair. A younger version of Gwyn, maybe eight years old or so. Janet could not take her gaze off the girl. "Get her, too."

"Which one?" Deena looked her way, and Janet pointed. Deena shook her head, "No. You have a generous heart, but I am finally up to quota."

Janet persisted. "You said the future needed people."

"She is the wrong sort, too old to learn easily, too young to care for babies. Nursing mothers make the best transition. They focus on their children, and the children grow up learning our ways and language."

Janet stared at Deena. The slave dealer sensed another sale and hovered next to her. "Look, if we leave her she will just be bought by some jerk-off who will keep her until she is old enough to screw." Judging by the looks on the men, that would be in a year or two. Janet saw the buyers stripping teenage boys and girls, admiring their rears and cracking jokes in Old Norse that did not need translation. Why didn't Deena just buy the whole lot of them?

In broken Gaelic, Janet began to bargain with the dealer. She wished she hadn't bought so much bullshit, because she ended up having to outbid a hairy pervert drooling over the frightened girl.

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Paying was a problem. She had to empty all of her wallet, leaving only the brooch and portal key. The dealer took the Roman coins, Greek Byzants and big pennies—weighing them out on a little moneylender's balance. It was the U.S. currency that he balked at. No Viking would wipe his butt with folding money. Nor did the dealer want the nickels. He sneered at the dimes and quarters—copper sandwiches disguised as silver—which showed that a Dark Age moron had more sense than the U.S. mint. He took the pennies and the silver dollar. Janet felt silly buying a slave with a Liberty dollar and Lincoln head pennies. Though not *half* as silly as the archeologist who might eventually find them in a Viking hoard. She knew that was the kind of find you slipped into your pocket and said nothing about. Imagine getting up at a conference and saying you had found a 1979D, In God We Trust, minted by Haakon the Good. Copper cannot be carbon-dated, but jobs *can* be lost for mental instability and making a mockery of the profession.

She was still short. Canute the Child Molester was about to claim the girl when Deena nodded to one of her Norse slaver buddies. He dug into his purse and paid the difference.

She put a silver arm around Janet's shoulder. "You are too great-hearted for your own good, but that is why you aided me. I still owe you for that."

Deena's light silver touch made Janet feel guilty. She had not dared tell Deena what Bran's motives had been, but had let her go on thinking that the Ban Ja-nant was just an innocent bystander.

Taking the girl's hand, Janet felt absurd leading her back to the ship. What would she *do* with her? She had bought her for no better reason than that she looked like Gwyn. She asked Deena, "Do you ever just take people back to where they came from?"

Deena gave her a sad smile. "We cannot go through history righting wrongs. That hopeless task would take forever, and half the time those we saved would just be made to suffer worse as a result of our interference. This lot comes from places that no longer exist, so I am afraid that you are stuck with her."

Back at sea, they boarded the *Krakan,* bidding goodbye to the longship and its jolly slaver crew. Janet took the terrified child to her cabin. She had been enslaved, starved, bought at auction, taken to sea, then swallowed by a plastic dragon. Janet gave her some tofu to eat, kneeling beside her. Old Norse had sounded like pig grunts, so she tried some Gaelic. "My name is Janet," she tapped her chest.

With a feeble smile, the girl wiped strawberry tofu off her chin, and said, "Gwyn."

A bit more broken Gaelic and she discovered this Gwyn came from Ireland, had a mother named Branwen and a brother named Bran. Janet

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found herself shaking more than the girl. She took this little Gwyn and her tale to Deena, who was setting course from the mid-Atlantic portal. Deena listened, then said, "Ask her what her maternal grandmother's name was."

The girl's blue eyes brightened and she said, "Gwyn."

"You see?" said Deena, "These names alternate. Every other generation in her family is likely to have a girl named Gwyn. Since her mother's name is Branwen, she is also bound to have a brother named Bran. Such names are as common as red hair among the Celts."

Janet knew that this was true. She had heard Bran sing those same names in a dozen Irish oldies. *Her* Gwyn, and *her* Bran, had been dead for hundreds of years by now. What a sad thought. She wanted to go home.

Deena insisted that she see the future first. "I came straight for you, without even bringing in my quota. Come with me. When my work is done, I will take you back—if you still want to go."

Janet could hardly say no. Deena *had* come for her. But she was determined to collect her list of winning horses, get rid of this Gwyn; then get the hell back to Eastport.

Deena let Janet pilot the long jump, through the mid-Atlantic portal, using Bran's key. They emerged in a far-future Atlantic, one portal short of Home. When the *Krakan* got to the Maine coast, Janet saw that Eastport didn't have much future to look forward to. At periscope depth, the water vibrated with green sunlight, and the submarine threaded its way between drowned buildings crusted with starfish. Gaping windows rimmed with barnacles stared back at Janet. She saw streets, parking lots, overpasses, and swimming pools on the shallow sea bottom. The Maine coast looked like it had been built up so much that it sank.

"Greenhouse effect," said Deena. "Polar ice melted, submerging the whole Atlantic seaboard." The largest buildings were still inhabited, bottom floors encased in plastic, upper stories rising into the air and light. Submarines docked at street level, and wakes crisscrossed the surface overhead. A declining population had no need for the mosaic of smaller structures decorating the sea floor.

"You will like the new weather," said Deena, "almost tropical." Well, Maine would not miss the ski bums and snowbunnies, but it was too bad about losing every town from Portsmouth to Eastport. No wonder the Indians didn't want it back.

They docked at a spidery white substation built over the same portal where she had parked the jeep, ages ago. "We are almost Home," Deena explained. "This is as close as we can bring the sub. Portals into Home period are all small and placed on the continental shelves. It's our form of quarantine, to keep portal keys from being used against us. People

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cannot step out into our Home period, ships cannot sail into our seas. I even must arrange medichecks for everyone—you, me, and all of my quota. The past has a million diseases we do not need." She ran fingers through her white hair, pushing it back from her face. Almost home, she should have seemed relaxed, instead she looked tired.

"How old are you, Deena?" Janet had never thought to ask before.

The cool smile returned. "If I told you, you would not believe me, but we can talk about all that later. You have a great future ahead of you. Get your things. I will send the others through, then come back for you."

Janet went to her cabin to pack. Gwyn was gone. Damn, the ape must have collected her already, taken her to the portal chamber with the others. Janet had wanted to explain each step to the girl, so she wouldn't be scared. She saw that Deena was drawing a sharp line between her and "the others." It bothered her that Deena thought that she was somehow different from Gwyn, from any of them.

At least Deena wasn't rushing her. She tossed things into her pack and wallet, until all that was left were her boots. Lifting them, she felt the knife. Branwen's knife, with the silver horses running along the blade. What if this little Gwyn *recognized* the knife, said that it was her mother's? Janet had accepted Deena's explanation. But what *if*? She felt the brooch and portal key in her wallet. Memories stirred, as though she could see things that were *going to* happen.

Pulling on the boots, slinging the wallet over her shoulder, she followed the docking tube into the white-walled substation. Deena was not there, but the SuperChimp was slouched against a blank doorway. That had to be the portal chamber where Gwyn was waiting. What else would the gorilla be guarding?

Strolling up, Janet jerked her thumb towards the sub. "Hey, Cheeta, Deena wants you pronto. I'll watch the door."

The ape clomped off into the docking tube. As soon as he was out of sight, she punched the small green panel. The white wall dilated. The portal chamber took up most of the substation. It looked and smelled sterile to her, bright and white but for the matte-yellow ring marking the portal. She saw Deena's quota sitting in ragged clumps outside the circle, looking worried, looking bored.

Pressing the inside panel to close the door, she called softly, "Gwyn." Everyone looked her way. What else was there to do? The girl got up and came running over. Before Gwyn got to her, Janet froze, paralyzed by what she saw across the chamber.

On the far side of the yellow portal ring sat a woman Janet's age, with the same hair and eye-color. The woman was heavier than Janet, and the lines in her face were drawn tighter. A tie-dyed T-shirt covered young and braless Earth Mother breasts. Her long hair was held back by the

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headband Dad had always hated, and her face was as familiar as the face in the picture Janet kept under the floorboards in the loft. In her arms was Jim, Jr., and little Sharon was standing beside her, holding onto Mom's miniskirt.

The white wall behind Janet began to dilate. Faster than she thought she could move, Janet leaped to one side, dragging Gwyn with her, flattening both of them against the chamber wall.

Deena stepped through. Janet hit the inner panel hard, holding it down to keep the ape from following.

Deena spun about.

"That is my Mom," Janet pointed with her free hand, "and my brother and my little sister."

Deena bit her lip. "I was not sure," she said slowly, "but I suspected. You said they vanished close to where I made a pick-up. This has not been an easy quota for me."

"Pick-up? Deena, this is *kidnapping,* not a Goddamned *date.*"

Deena's gray eyes flicked back and forth. Janet was still holding the panel down. Deena said, "When we took her, I did not know you existed, or I would have wanted *you,* too. You come from good stock."

"Good *stock?"* Janet nearly gagged on the words, holding hard to Gwyn. *Her* Gwyn. Branwen's daughter. She did not doubt that now. "Deena, you are a goddamned slaver in a silver suit. No wonder you got on so well with Jarl Thorfinn's seagoing thieves and rapists. This *is* Gwyn, isn't it? You've been letting longships through the Atlantic portal, to periods where the pickings are easier."

"We are so short of people," said Deena, "We cannot have SuperChimps raising our children. We did not make the Norsemen into pirates. We work with what we find, and limit what we take. It is really for the best."

Looking past Deena, Janet stared at her mother. She saw a scared young woman, holding her two small children, cut off from a first-born daughter that she must have loved. Tears welled up. "I want to take my mother home."

She held the door, but if she let go, Deena had her ape waiting. Neither moved. Both were breathing fast. The silver clad woman said, "Give your future a chance. Take them back to their own time and they will live and die in squalor. You will cut decades off all your lives."

Janet struggled to reply. "*You* took more than a decade away from *me.* You made me grow up thinking that my Mom threw me away, that she didn't *want* me. And for what? So that you could have slaves to raise your kids for you and do all the little tasks you no longer want to be bothered with. Deena, I am *not* a chimp, or some sort of show dog with a good bloodline that you can use to breed *more* Goddamned slaves."

Deena's silvered hand seized Janet's forearm. The cold contact felt

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draining; Janet's hand fell off the door panel. Deena's voice sounded very cool, very distant. "My quota is full. You clearly cannot make a rational decision. So I'll make it for you." She reached past Janet for the green panel. A two-hundred kilo ape waited on the far side, slavering to do Deena's bidding.

Janet slumped down in Deena's grip. Her free hand felt her boot top, finding the knife her Irish Mom had given her. Her fingers closed on the handle. Putting every ounce of fading strength into the thrust, Janet plunged the knife into Deena's hand, pinning it to the plastic wall, just short of the panel.

Deena gasped and let go of her, drawing back as if from contamination. "You *savage*."

With both hands Janet grabbed Deena's portal key, stripping it off her arm. "Yes," said Janet, "just a savage. So stay the hell away from me, from my family, from Bran. You'll still have all the rest of time to play with." She didn't know if Deena would take the advice, but it did no harm to try. Janet saw the future stretched ahead of her in a clear series of point-instants. She was going to get Gwyn home to Branwen. There she would give Bran his portal key, to protect his family with. Actually, she had already *done* these things, long ago, before she ever met Bran on the beach.

Beginning and end were completely tangled now, and she was setting in motion the events that would lead to her abduction. When she returned with this young Gwyn, she would appear out of nowhere to Bran's people—the Ban Ja-nant returning their daughter, giving them the key to the portals. No wonder Gwyn worshiped her. No wonder Bran loved her. No wonder they used her story to track her across time and space. That was how and why Bran found her on the beach.

Hyperlight played hell with cause and effect, turning space-time into a snake swallowing itself. She supposed she would also give Bran the brooch in the wallet Gwyn had given to her.

Holding tight to Gwyn, she stepped over into the yellow portal ring. Then she reached out for the woman on the far side, saying, "Mom, it's me, Janet. I've come for you." Her mother stood up, stepping forward, clinging to her two small children, facing her grown daughter. Janet stared back, still reaching out. God, she is so much like me. Here we are, scant meters apart, the same age at the same time. She heard the door dilating behind her, and knew that the SuperChimp was coming through.

Taking her mother's hand, she drew mother, brother, and little sister all into the circle along with Gwyn. "Mom, I'm Janet, your daughter. I'm taking you home." As the SuperChimp charged, she twisted the portal key.

Fade to black. ●

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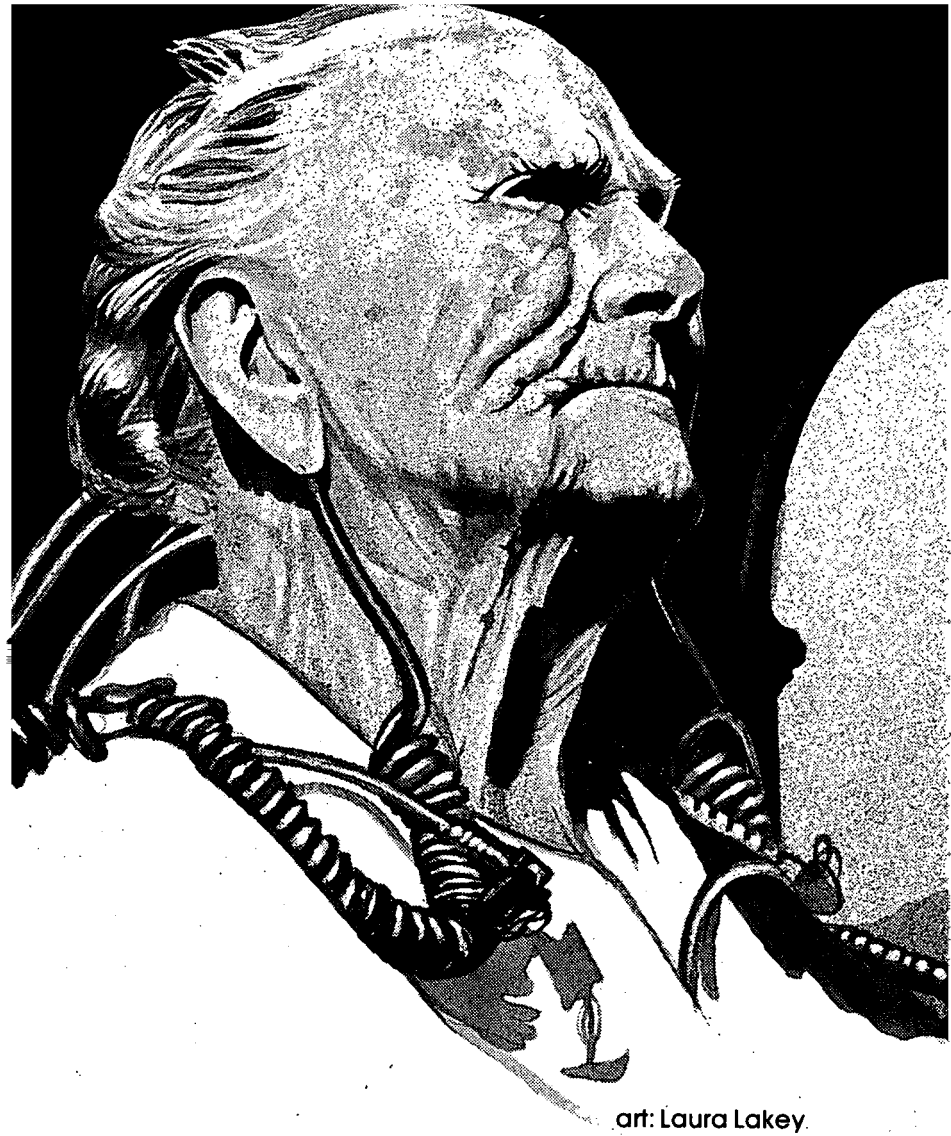

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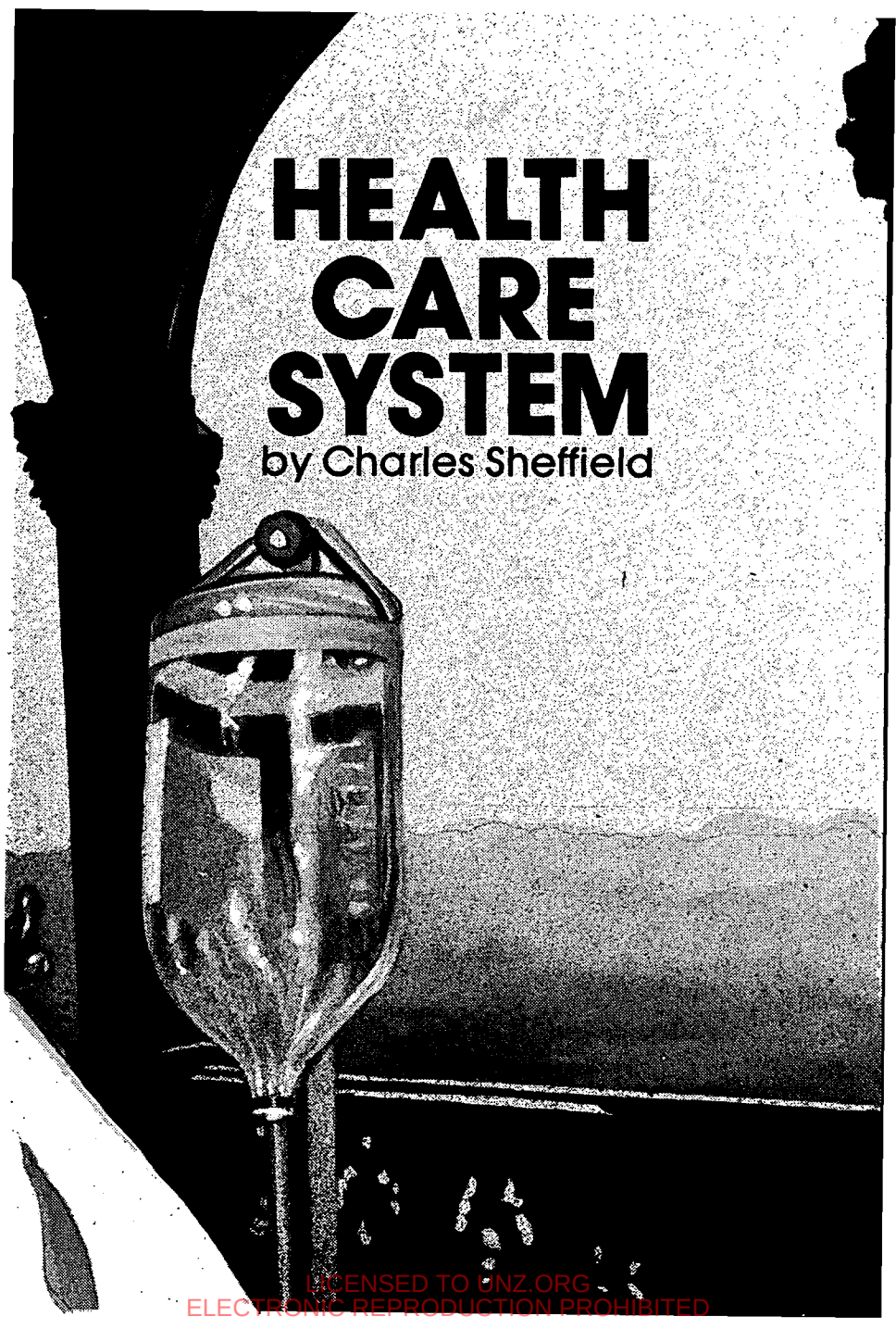
HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

by Charles Sheffield



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Thomas Matlock drove out to the Greenwood estate one foggy morning in late December. Money was the bait, but curiosity was initially a stronger lure.

It was three days after Christmas, and the roads were almost deserted. The limousine wound its way up to the highest point of the Catoctin State Park, then began a cautious descent over roads treacherous with moisture and patches of ground ice. At Matlock's request, the car slowed at an overlook when they were still a mile and a half from the estate. He lowered the window and peered out. The valley below was covered in dense ground mist, but the four wings of the mansion jutted high above it, light grey stone and steep slate roofs. Matlock inspected all that he could see and guessed at the rest. Five hundred acres of land inside the nine-foot fence, maybe another thousand outside it. A hundred-plus rooms to the house. Four gatehouses and guest "cottages," each one bigger than Matlock's own suburban villa.

Matlock breathed deep, inhaling the clear mountain air. At least a million dollars a year in upkeep down there, according to the rumor mills. But that was less than a quarter of the interest, according to those same mills, on Miriam Greenwood's estate. Life styles of the rich and reclusive.

He finally nodded. "All right. Any time."

The car nosed forward, down the long slope and on until it came to heavy steel grilles that swung half-open at an electronic signal from the driver. A uniformed guard walked forward, peered in, checked Thomas Matlock against something he held in his hand, and signaled to open the gates the rest of the way. The car moved on inside the fence, proceeding towards the main house at a sedate ten miles an hour.

Security procedures were stricter inside. Three guards waited there. Matlock had to produce his hospital ID, and watch while his fingerprints were checked electronically. At last he was allowed in through a second set of doors, saw his TV image matched to a stored template on a color screen, and could finally walk on to inspect Miriam Greenwood's private domain.

The entrance to the mansion had kept its original appearance, oak-paneled walls and polished floors of black-and-white square tiles. Expensive rugs dotted the forty-by-forty expanse. Matlock and his two escorts passed over them, traversed a short, dark corridor, and came to the transition. Decor moved from early twentieth century dryrot to modern sterile; no carpets; walls tiled as well as floors. They walked on. The room that Thomas Matlock was finally ushered into was as antiseptic and lacking in character as any lab at the hospital.

Miriam Greenwood was sitting in an electric wheelchair, behind a desk furnished with a clock, a pad of paper, and a single telephone. She differed

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from her pictures in only two minor respects: the sparse grey hair was covered with a soft woolen skullcap, and she was not smoking a cigarette. She inclined her head to Matlock, inviting him to sit on the chair opposite.

"Five thousand dollars were deposited in your bank account when you entered the door of this house." Miriam Greenwood's voice was rusty, but still strong. She inclined her head again, this time toward the telephone. "Check, if you wish to do so. Otherwise, we can proceed to business."

"It is not necessary to check."

"I agree. That deposit was designed only to capture your attention." Greenwood sat up straighter. "So watch, and wait."

She pressed a control in the arm of the wheelchair. There was a delay of maybe half a minute, then a door to Matlock's left opened. A woman in a nurse's uniform looked through.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I would like orange juice. For me, and also my visitor."

"Yes, ma'am." She nodded, and retreated.

Miriam Greenwood gestured at the clock. "Twenty-nine seconds. Adequate. Two seconds better than usual. On the other hand, this is the day shift. Response is slower at night."

Thomas Matlock kept his face expressionless. "I've done timing comparisons at the hospital. The mean time between a call and a nurse's response to it is eighteen minutes. Twenty-three minutes at night."

"But your patients are not promised fast, exclusive, twenty-four-hour, continuous care. That's what I'm paying for." A thin hand lifted and stabbed a finger at Matlock. "And I'm not getting it! Twenty-nine seconds. A person could die in that much time. I've had two heart attacks already. Who knows when there might be another one?"

She paused and checked the desk clock again, when the nurse reappeared and placed full glasses and a pitcher of orange juice on the desk. As the nurse was leaving, Greenwood gestured to the two men behind Thomas Matlock. "I'll signal you if I need you. Stay close."

She picked up a glass, took one tiny sip, and waited until the others were out of the room. "Forty-four seconds, from the order for orange juice until its appearance. More than a minute from the time I first called. Do you think the response would have been any quicker if I were seriously ill? I can answer that for you. It wouldn't."

Miriam Greenwood leaned forward. The lines on each side of her mouth deepened. "Dr. Matlock, I'm eighty-nine years old. I'm fragile. I'm going to die someday. You know that, I know that, and I don't expect miracles. But I'm going to fight like hell for every second. There's no way I'll die sooner than I have to. And I've studied the statistics. Get to a trauma patient soon enough, and their survival chances go up dramatically."

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"They do. But I've never heard of a health-care system with a mean service time of less than a minute. What you have is incredibly good."

"It may be. It's the best that money can buy. But it's not good enough."

"I don't see how you could get a better one."

"You can build me one." Greenwood's withered lips offered a faint smile. "Ah, you don't think you can, eh? But listen to me." She paused for a long, shallow breath. "Give me five minutes of your time."

"You bought four hours of it."

"I want to buy more than that. Hear me out." She touched one of the controls on her wheelchair, and the back moved to a deeper reclining angle. "One nice thing about having a bit of money, people come to you, instead of you having to go to them. Now, you might think that must be to my advantage, but funnily enough, it's not so. Not always. One month ago, the director of your hospital called, to tell me that the new wing I'd financed was going to be opened, and would I like to be there for the ceremony. I hadn't left this building for over a year, because my doctors were advising against it. But I decided I was going. I didn't know why. I think my subconscious did. All my life I've played hunches. I said I was going, and I told Ronson—my head doctor—to shut up. If I dropped dead while I was out, that would be my own dumb fault. So they wheeled me out, and they propped me up in the limo, and took me down to Georgetown." She sighed, the weak, chesty sigh of a sixty-year smoker. "I saw the new wing, but I saw more than that. I saw the equipment in the wing. And I saw OPEC—the Online Patient Experimental Clinic. Your own lab. Telemetry feeds, direct from patient to computer. Feedback within ten milliseconds."

Greenwood lifted her head, and chuckled at the expression on Matlock's face. "That's it. Finally know why you're here, don't you? If you could do it for them, you could do it for me."

But Thomas Matlock was shaking his head. "You only saw the director's demonstration project. It's based on my lab, but it's bogus."

Miriam Greenwood creaked upright. "Bogus?" Her voice was no more than a thin whisper. "Are you saying Livingstone set out to fool me? If he did . . ."

"No, no. Not the way you think." Thomas Matlock saw a vision of wealth appear and disappear. He didn't want that. "The telemetry feeds from the patient to the computer are near-instantaneous, just the way you said, and the computer analysis of patient condition takes only a few milliseconds. But a physician always approves the treatment before it's given. The director cut that step out of the demo to make it go faster and used cases where approval for treatment had already been given. So it wasn't so much *bogus*—I shouldn't have used that word—it was oversimplified."

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"Ah." Miriam Greenwood was relaxing again in her chair, eyes closed. "I see. But it wouldn't have to work that way."

"Really, it would."

"You said the computer does the analysis, the computer decides the treatment. So cut out the physician, and the computer could start a treatment in a couple of heartbeats. Ronson's a pretty good doctor, but he'll never compete with a computer for speed. Use online feedback of medication. You know how to do it, build an expert system that incorporates the best medical knowledge in the world into the computer code. And you can hook up all your sensors directly to me—permanently, if you have to. Hell, I *live* in this damned chair. The catheters and sensors could be built right into the seat and arms."

"No." Matlock hesitated. "We couldn't do that," he said at last. "You see, a physician *has* to be there—physically present—to give approval before treatment begins. It's illegal any other way."

"Ah. Illegal." Miriam Greenwood sighed, and her dark eyes blinked open. "Is that all? I thought for a horrible moment you were going to tell me it wasn't *feasible.*"

Thomas Matlock rolled down his car window and waited patiently as the ID checks were performed. Even though the guards all knew exactly who he was, and why he was here, it made no difference. They went through the whole ten yards with him each time.

"Thanks, Jack. Be back in a few hours." He grinned at the guard as he was finally waved through. The man wasn't to blame. He was reflecting Miriam Greenwood's personal paranoia. Matlock drove his Lamborghini up to the circular driveway, parked, and submitted cheerfully to the second set of identification checks before he was allowed in.

To an outside observer, the changes in the past year had been negligible. Miriam Greenwood sat in the same chair, in the same study. A compact box, located under the wheelchair seat in the same place as the batteries, was the only visible addition. Greenwood herself was a little thinner, a little frailer. She nodded at Matlock as he moved to sit across from her.

"You said I'd reach the point where I wouldn't even notice it happening, and I think we're almost there."

"Let's take a look." Matlock whipped his hand toward her eyes, stopping a couple of inches short. She flinched, then nodded. "There it is. I don't feel a thing, but if you listen hard you can hear the pump starting. It's balancing the adrenalin now. The whole thing is perfect."

Matlock nodded and waited. By now he knew Miriam Greenwood.

"Or *nearly* perfect," she went on. "I was talking yesterday on the telephone to Livingstone, over at Georgetown, and he mentioned there's a

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new drug, xanthyl, being used as a beta-blocker. I queried the computer here—" a minute nod downwards to the base of the wheelchair "—and there's no mention of it. Ronson had never heard of it, either."

"There's a good reason for that." Matlock shrugged. "Xanthyl is being used in European tests, but it's not yet FDA-approved. Most online data bases don't have it in them, because it might be dangerous."

"Or it might be a life-saver."

"I can't take that sort of risk."

"What risk? I haven't asked you to do anything yet."

"You will."

"Tom, it's a very simple request. I want two things, and you can't possibly object to the first one. I'd like the online patient care computer in my wheelchair hooked up to the main household computer. In fact, I'd like to slave the main computer to this one, so that I have an override from here if I ever need it. Would you do that for me?"

"That doesn't sound too bad. What's the second one?"

"Tom, you're getting paranoid. How old are you, thirty-seven? You shouldn't be suspecting everybody for another forty years."

"What's the second one?"

"Nothing terrible. I don't want to die before my time, that's all. You gave me an expert system, but it's not expert enough. It uses the best existing knowhow, but it lags behind the real edge. I don't want that. If any new treatments are coming down the pike, I have to know about them—soon. I want my household computer hooked directly into the big centers and information systems—the Mayo, and Sloane-Kettering, and the Medline system at the National Institutes of Health. Not shared modems, either, I want dedicated lines. Then we'll have a *decent* system. And anytime I want to browse through and look at new treatments or experimental drugs, I can do it here without bothering anybody."

Matlock stood up and stared down at the frail figure in the wheelchair. "Do you realize what that would take? This house would have to be defined as a full-fledged medical research facility. There would have to be a validation process, certification of staff, data-handling procedures, drug handling procedures . . ."

He paused. Miriam Greenwood had moved her chair forward and skimmed an envelope across the desk.

"Open it, Tom, before you tell me it's impossible." She was wheezing, a rare sign of emotion. "My life is my life. My money is only my money. I'll trade one for the other. That check is all for you. Take it, and tell me how much more it takes to deal with anyone else we need."

The rule had been established in the first few weeks: Miriam Green-

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wood did not want to talk to Matlock over the telephone. If he needed to communicate with her, he would come to the estate.

He broke that rule once, early in the second year. It took ten impatient minutes of hard talk and threats to push the house staff into putting him through to her, and when the connection was at last made he insisted on a video channel. He wanted to see Greenwood, see how she reacted.

"You lied to me," he said, as soon as the TV was active.

"Did I?" Her lined face was calm. It seemed his call was no surprise.

"You know you did." He shook his finger furiously at the camera. "When I arranged for your computer to be hooked into the information systems, our agreement was completely clear."

"Quite true. It was."

"Your medical facilities would be defined as a full research center, but you would get only information. No supplies. No screened labs—and no experimental drugs!"

"That is correct. Are you resigning?"

The cool question was like a splash of ice water. Matlock paused.

"Because if you are," went on the quiet voice, "I certainly can't stop you. But I want to remind you what that will mean. Nine-tenths of your income. The home on St. Kitts. The ownership interest in the casino. Sylvia, too, unless my judgment is badly in error—yes, of course I know all about her and the apartment, just as I know how much you have in each of your bank accounts. Would you like to know what *her* background is? I suppose not—you're too obsessed with her. But it's not at all what she told you, Tom."

He shook his head in an abrupt shivering motion. "Experimental drugs, from all over the world. My signature splashed all over the applications, certifying their uses. If anything were to happen at the house, I'd be ruined. Totally ruined."

"It won't happen." The thin figure in the wheelchair sat up straighter, and her voice strengthened. "Now, Tommy Matlock, get all this in perspective. We spent a lot of time and money, you and I, making sure I have access to the latest information. Fine. But what good would that be, if the drugs I needed—urgently—were half a world away? We could get data in a fraction of a second, but I might have to wait days for drugs. That's the exact opposite of an efficient health care system. I realized that we needed the drugs on hand *here*. Maybe we would never use them, but maybe they would save my life. Wasn't that the purpose of everything we've been doing?"

"They're experimental drugs—dangerous drugs, with God knows what side effects. If Ronson were to start playing around with them—"

"Which he won't do." As Miriam Greenwood leaned back, Matlock could see new catheters trailing from her lower body. How long was it

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since she had left that wheelchair, for any reason? Now that he looked closer, he saw the recent changes. Her arms were just bony sticks, and her head was supported by a padded brace. Her mouth was lipless, drawn back over prominent dentures.

"Ronson won't do anything wild," she went on, "for the best possible reason. Today he has a large income—a very large income. But the hour that I die, so does the money supply. His contract is clear. He's cut off that same minute, and out the door looking for another job. If anything can keep me alive, our good Doctor Ronson will do it."

She paused, then nodded her head as though listening to something. "In fact, Tommy, don't you think it would be a good idea if you worked with me on the same basis? You're not going to resign, are you?"

The vacation home, the casino, Sylvia . . . Matlock did not speak.

"So that's all settled, then." Miriam Greenwood smiled. "You'll get more money, naturally . . . as long as I'm alive. We all want that, don't we, more than anything. Let's work on it, Tom. I'm nearly ninety-one now. Let's try for a century, then we'll worry how we go on to a hundred and five."

"It was a shock, Tommy, a nasty shock. And you know as well as I do, shocks could be very bad for me."

The toothless mouth was moving, but the harsh metallic voice came from the synthesizer and voice enhancer on the back of the wheelchair. Matlock stared at Miriam Greenwood in annoyance. He had installed that system four months ago for emergency use, but now she employed it all the time in preference to normal speech.

"I quite agree, we don't want any sort of shock. But I still don't know what happened. Your message didn't give any details." Matlock hid his irritation. He had dropped everything and headed for the house the moment the urgent call reached the hospital. He had risked police pursuit and his own skin, pushing the Lamborghini up over a hundred and twenty on quiet parts of the road. And after all that—nothing! Miriam Greenwood appeared to be perfectly normal.

"Of course I didn't give details. It's too important a problem to talk about over the telephone." The frail figure was covered to the neck by a white sheet, but Greenwood's hands were moving beneath it, fingering the controls in the arms of the wheelchair. She came rolling around the desk and stopped right by Matlock's chair. "I thought we had taken care of everything, Tommy, I really did. And now I find there's a terrible weakness in what we've done. Not your fault." A clawlike hand emerged from the sheet, patted his arm in a conciliatory way, and retreated. "It's my fault. I need your help."

"What happened?"

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"This afternoon, a little after one o'clock, I noticed one of the television screens had a problem with its colors." The skeletal head nodded upwards, to the array of monitors set along the interior wall. "I rang for one of the nurses on duty. There are always two of them, twenty-four hours a day, and they know the rule as well as we do: they must be here in the room with me, in less than thirty seconds. I waited—two whole minutes. Then I rang again. And still no one came, not for another five minutes. I could have been dying. I could have been dead!"

"I'll check into it at once."

"No need for that. I found out what happened from Ronson. The two nurses on duty were a man and a woman, and they were having an affair. When they should have been on duty they had sneaked off to bed together, away where they couldn't hear or see my signal."

"They should be fired." There was real anger in Matlock's voice. If Miriam Greenwood should die now, when his own cash flow needs were at a maximum . . . "I'll talk to Dr. Ronson."

"I took care of it. They were gone hours ago. I can do most anything when I set my mind to it, and I've dismissed hundreds of servants in the past fifty years. Surely you didn't imagine I'd drag you here for something I can do perfectly well myself? No, Tommy, I said I had a real problem, and I meant it."

She rolled the chair back around to the other side of the desk, to face him again. The old eyes and mouth were like cracks in a parchment face. It was another minute before she spoke again. Matlock had time to reflect on the fact that he was a servant, too, one who would be dismissed as casually as the nurses if he were no longer useful.

"Your online patient care system," went on Miriam Greenwood at last. "It takes care of anything that I need in the way of medication, and that's fine. But it's only one part of health care. Suppose something happens where I need help from a human? Cardiac arrest, or choking, or a fall? The best computer and telemetry in the world won't do a thing for me. I'm right back where I started, totally dependent on help from nurses and doctors. We proved today that they're as unreliable as ever. Seven minutes, before anyone came!"

Matlock's stomach rumbled. He had spent the whole lunch hour at the apartment, arguing with Sylvia. He was sure she was being unfaithful to him, but he had no proof. Now it was four-thirty, and he had not eaten since breakfast. "I agree, it's unforgivable," he said hurriedly. "But I don't see how you can do anything about it. People are people. Even with the best staff in the world, there will be delays sometimes."

"Why?"

As usual, Greenwood could floor him with a simple question. He stared at her.

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"If you're paid to be here without delay," she went on, "and paid handsomely, with that as your top priority, why should there be delays?"

"It's human nature. Someone may be in the middle of doing something else, and they think it's important. So . . ." He shrugged.

"I'm glad you agree with me." The fingers were busy beneath the white sheet. "If we just let things slide along, it may happen again. Once I had that thought, I remembered something I found last week in a data base search. It's an extremely interesting line of research being carried out in Guangzhou, in southern China. Behind you."

Matlock swung around, to see a research abstract scrolling onto one of the display screens.

"Do you know the work, Tommy?" said the metallic voice behind him.

"Well enough to tell you it's forbidden."

"In this country."

"Anywhere, outside China. Do you understand what it's reporting?"

"I think so. It's telling how to control a human's primary response, through a computer and a programable implant. When the person takes the action approved by the computer, the implant provides a stimulus to the pleasure centers of the brain."

"In other words, a form of mind control. The Chinese have apparently been trying it in infantry training. Successfully, if this can be believed. It's hard to imagine a more powerful stimulus to obey a command."

"Well?"

Matlock swung back to face Miriam Greenwood. The ancient face was staring at him with strange intensity. "Well, what?"

"Don't you see, Tommy? It's exactly what we need. We have the computer, right here. I control it. If the medical staff here at the house were all equipped with the right implants . . ."

"That's the craziest—" Matlock paused. "Mrs. Greenwood. I've learned a lot in these past two years, and I respect your brains more than you think. But don't you see, you'd never in a million years get any of the staff members to agree to your putting a microcomputer in their heads. And as for—"

"Save your breath." The face carried a look of sly triumph. "Tommy, you just don't understand money and people. I can explain it in very simple terms. First, I wouldn't even attempt to affect anyone's actions, unless those actions conflicted directly with the care of my health. I have no interest otherwise in what they choose to do. Second, it's for a limited time. I want to buy that sort of service for one year from the staff, at forty thousand dollars per person per month. At the end of that time, they can either sign up again—their choice, no pushing from me—or they'd be free to have the implant removed and leave."

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"You'd never get anyone to agree. It would mean an illegal operation, with no—"

"I already asked. Ronson agreed, and so did nine others. That's more than enough volunteers to make it work . . . provided you will help. We don't have the facilities or the skills to perform the operation. You have both."

"Absolutely not. I don't even want to discuss it. Don't you understand, we're not talking medical hand-slapping now—we're talking jail sentences."

"No one who worked for me would ever go to jail. I may not know medicine, but I do know law."

"I don't care. The answer is still no."

"Maybe it is, but don't say it now. Drive back home, take your time, and then come and see me in a couple of days. Remember, my life might depend on prompt service, and nothing is more important to me. I'd hate to have to fire you. And if you help, naturally it would mean more money. A lot more."

Matlock shook his head and stood up. He was heading for the door when the final words came.

"—and, of course, there could be other benefits. Wouldn't it be nice to put an implant in Sylvia, with just your finger on her pleasure button? I don't think you'd find that difficult to arrange . . . with my help. Think about it, Tommy. Just think . . ."

There was no reason for Sylvia's trip to the big house, unless it was to show off his handiwork to Miriam Greenwood.

As the Lamborghini approached the barred metal gates, Matlock noticed something new. Instead of a uniformed guard, a grey metal cabinet stood beside the fence. A camera turned to track the car's progress, then a synthesized voice requested that both passengers advance to the machine and provide identification.

He turned to Sylvia. "Don't worry, it's just Mrs. Greenwood. She's been reducing the number of staff to make things more automated."

She reached out to touch his arm. The implant was programable, with Sylvia's default values set to produce pleasure when she looked at him, rather more when she touched him. The most powerful joys had been reserved for other situations, and Matlock could vary the overall level, from thrilling pleasure to a sensation which apparently made Sylvia unable to think or speak. In some ways, Matlock envied her. Nothing in his own life provided that much joy. Maybe someday, an implant of his own, under his own control . . .

The inside of the house had changed also in the past three months. With a staff reduced from forty to ten, most routine functions had been

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delegated to the household computer. Identification checks were automatic, and a small mobile robot glided before them as they headed for Miriam Greenwood's study. It ignored Matlock's protest that he knew the way perfectly well.

She was there, as always, in the wheelchair. Matlock had become so used to her that Sylvia's gasp of dismay came as a surprise to him. For the first time in a year, he looked at Miriam Greenwood with an objective eye.

She never bothered now with the grey woolen cap, and her skull showed veined and delicate, its few thin strands of white hair falling forward onto the lined forehead. With the regular use of the synthesizer, she no longer wore dentures. Her lower face had collapsed inwards, wizened hollow cheeks framing a pursed, sunken mouth. Fortunately, the white sheet covering her from neck to feet hid the worst features, along with IV's and catheters and waste bags.

Matlock took Sylvia's hand in his, and turned up the pleasure level a notch. She sighed, and moved to stand close to him.

"So this is Sylvia." The voice box spoke softly, thoughtfully. "Welcome, my dear. You look very well."

"I feel well." Sylvia sounded happy, but a little puzzled. "I feel wonderful."

"That is good to hear." The frail head turned slowly from the woman to the man. "A handsome couple. Ah, Tommy, you won't believe it, but I once possessed such soft charms myself."

"How is everything else going?" The question was perfunctory. Matlock was vaguely uneasy. He could increase Sylvia's pleasure level, if he had to, until she was oblivious to Miriam Greenwood's appearance or indeed to any of her surroundings, but he didn't want to do so. That would spoil his own plans for systematic pleasure-probing with Sylvia, at another time and place.

"I believe things are going extremely well." The death's-head smiled. "I would almost say, perfectly, but I know you do not like to hear that word."

Matlock came to full attention. "Problems?"

"Not for anything that we have done so far. In a few minutes time, I would like to run a small experiment, so that you can see for yourself. But there is one other matter. Raw materials."

"We already took care of that. Ronson has every damned drug in the book, new and old."

"Drugs, yes. That is one form of raw material. But suppose that we had a different problem. Suppose that I suffered some organic failure. Suppose that we urgently needed a transplant, and nothing that closely matches my tissue type was available fast, and locally. That would be

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a real problem. I've already had Ronson do tissue-typing for me, and no one here at the house is even close to me." A white hand crept out from under the sheet, and a finger moved up to rub the sunken temple. The forearm was festooned with sensors and IV's. "A bank, Tommy, that's what we need. An organ bank, and a tissue bank."

Matlock thrust his hand into his pocket, and turned the setting of Sylvia's unit up a random three or four notches. She shivered and gasped as the telemetered signal went to her implant, and sat down suddenly on the floor. But at least she was no longer listening.

"For God's sake, we shouldn't talk about that now." He stared around the room. "I'll do it, you know I will, but it will take a while. We'll have to set up an acquisitions program, search the area for donors—"

"The country. We want tissue types as close to me as possible. Unfortunately, I have no close living relatives."

"Then we'll have to set up the facilities here—they're very special, controlled low-temperature. But we can't talk about it now. Not with—" He gestured to the floor. Sylvia lay panting on her stomach, her mouth gaping and her eyes rolled up so that only the whites showed.

Greenwood gazed down at her calmly. "A pretty creature, isn't she? Lucky Tommy. However, I must point out that it was your choice to show her off to me, not my request that you bring her. I would suggest a little less stimulation, then you can leave her here with me while you check the rest of the system. And before you leave, we must of course discuss the financial needs of the tissue and organ bank. Now, to work. You go ahead, and I'll give the signal in one minute. Low level, so they won't do anything dangerous getting to me."

Matlock walked quietly toward the back of the house until he came to the kitchens. Two of the household staff were there, preparing food and talking quietly to each other. They nodded to him, but did not stop work. He was a familiar figure to them.

He examined the two men closely. They looked and sounded completely normal. The programable implants were hollow cylinders, less than a millimeter wide and three millimeters long. The operation to install them took a precise brain mapping using a PET scanner, followed by a five-minute procedure in which a hollow needle was driven through the skull and meninges to its destination deep beneath the *pia mater*. The implant was then passed inside the needle, along with its hair-thin antenna, and the needle itself was withdrawn. No inflammation, no post-operative recovery period. Matlock had observed the process most closely in Sylvia's case. She had been anesthetized early one evening in her apartment, carried to the hospital, received the implant, and had been taken home again within three hours. She knew nothing of what had happened to her. So far as she was concerned, she had drowsed off after

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lovemaking and woken at midnight with Matlock still at her side. He had observed no after-effects, not even a complaint of an itch at the installation site or a headache from the anesthetic.

As Matlock watched, the two men suddenly straightened. They placed the utensils they were holding neatly on a counter, and one of them switched off the oven. Then they turned in unison and headed for the door, pushing past him without a word of comment. They marched off side by side along the corridor that led to Miriam Greenwood's quarters, making good speed but with no great urgency. Each man had a contented smile on his face.

Matlock followed slowly. It was a low-level test, true enough, but the men's response was surely too leisurely to satisfy Greenwood. Probably a signal loss in the circuits that connected the wheelchair to the household's main computer. If he had some time at the weekend, he might return and give the system a bit of fine-tuning.

But the next weekend, Matlock was in Bermuda. The sudden decision to leave felt like random impulse, caused by cold, snowy weather at home and a desire to explore his new relationship with Sylvia. But sitting on a beach in warm sunshine, a planter's punch in his hand, Sylvia adoring by his side, he also reached a new insight.

He wanted to break away from Miriam Greenwood—desperately. And he could not.

In the past two years, he had made more money than he had ever dreamed of. There ought to be four million dollars in his bank account. Instead he was broke, with new bills coming in every day. The casino was an endless maw, its opening date still six months away, and the vacation home was far from paid for. Back taxes loomed larger and larger. He did the calculations over and over. If Greenwood survived for another year and a half, and he remained in her employ, he could be home free. If she died before that, he was on the rocks.

He rose to change for dinner filled with a new resolve. Since Greenwood wanted to live, desperately, he would throw all his efforts into helping her. If necessary he would ask for a leave of absence from the hospital—it produced only five percent of his income now—and devote himself to the care of Miriam Greenwood. He would become her slave, as Sylvia was now his slave.

The decision helped a lot. He was able to enjoy his meal, and notice the envious glances of the men around him. Here was a young, stunning, sexy woman, with no eyes for anyone except the man who sat opposite. Whenever there was an opportunity to do so, she was touching his hand, reaching out under the table to rub his calf with her stockinged foot, or nudging her knee against his. And the most curious thing about it was

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the secret looks that he was receiving from the women. They seemed even more interested than the men, particularly a pouting brunette who sat two tables away. Twice she had caught Matlock's eye, and held it regardless of the irritated looks from her companion, a bald-headed man in his late fifties.

New vistas were opening. Sylvia was healthy and obviously happy, with no harmful physical effects from the implant. She had remembered nothing of the episode with Miriam Greenwood, and other experiments suggested that times spent with the pleasure impulse at its maximum were lost at once from memory. She would do anything to please him now, anything to touch and hold him. But she was not the only woman in the world—already he found it hard to recall his own desperate obsession of just a few weeks earlier.

Why not that brunette? Why not two women with programable implants, or a dozen of them? He could make them all dote on him alone, all ready to do whatever he wanted them to do. It would take only a little more money and help from Miriam Greenwood. One more reason to stay in her service. . . .

Matlock returned from his holiday mentally relaxed, pleasantly sated physically, and resolved to make his patient live indefinitely. He landed at BWI Airport in the beginning of a new snow storm, dropped Sylvia off at the apartment, and drove by the hospital for a routine check for messages.

He felt a twinge of guilt as he approached his office. Two years ago he had promised to leave notice of his whereabouts, so that Miriam Greenwood could always reach him if she wanted to; but in his urge to get away from everything he had told no one at the hospital where he was going.

At the threshold he stopped and stared. He had left the modem in his office computer switched on, and now the whole floor was covered with paper from the printer in the corner. The machine was chattering even as he walked across to it.

COME AT ONCE, NEED YOU URGENTLY.

Thirty seconds later, the printer was at work again.

COME AT ONCE, NEED YOU URGENTLY.

Was that all? He knew the message could have come from only one place, but surely Ronson and Miriam Greenwood would have sent more than just those few words.

Matlock sank to his knees and began to look for the beginning of the paper scroll. His heart was pumping a hundred beats a minute. If she had died while he was away, without even a day of notice, he was a ruined man.

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He scrabbled at the folded and twisted sheets. It was there, the beginning of the whole message sequence—and it was from Ronson.

Miriam Greenwood had suffered a major stroke in the left occipital lobe of her brain. Substantial hemorrhaging. She was alive, but there were other problems. Ronson was too busy to describe them. Matlock was to come to the house at once, then he and Ronson—

The message broke off in mid-sentence.

Come at once. Matlock's eyes went to the top of the first sheet and he cursed aloud. 09:02:33—88/1/3. That meant nine A.M. on January 3. Three days and four hours ago, while he had been lounging on a sunny beach. And since then?

He ran the scrolled paper through his hands, sheet after sheet. Nothing more from Ronson, but at 9:05 on January 3, just three minutes after that first message, a single command appeared and went on and on.

COME AT ONCE, NEED YOU URGENTLY.

COME AT ONCE, NEED YOU URGENTLY.

No signature, no other words anywhere on the page.

Matlock left the room at a run. He was inside his car and out of the parking lot within thirty seconds. It was still snowing. Mid-afternoon traffic was light. He was able to reach 270 North in fifteen minutes. The road had been well-plowed, but other drivers were nervous and hindered his progress. He tailgated, passed as soon as he could, and still averaged no more than fifty.

Stroke, in the occipital lobe. Sight would be affected, almost certainly. Hemorrhaging. But how much hemorrhaging, and where was the blood flow? Was there significant clotting? God, after three days there could be just about anything. The one good sign was that repeated message. It came from the household computer, and that was under Miriam Greenwood's direct control. She was still alive.

"Hang in there, old woman. Don't die on me now." He muttered it to himself under his breath. Ronson was a fair doctor, but he didn't have Matlock's skills and knowledge. The only hope was Miriam Greenwood's own will to live. If there were any way to cling to life until Matlock arrived to help, that tough old mind would find it.

Conditions worsened when he hit Route 15. The snow fell more heavily, the Lamborghini's heater and defroster were inadequate, and the road narrowed to a two-lane highway. Overtaking was impossible. He became part of a procession, moving with the speed of the slowest and most nervous. By the time he reached the road that led through the park, struggled over its highest part, and was at last descending towards the Greenwood estate, it was nearly dark. He forced himself to slow down. If he slid the car off the road now he would never get out of the drifts.

Another ten minutes. The fence and the metal gates were finally visible

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through the swirling snowflakes. Matlock hunched over the wheel, his shoulders and neck tight with tension, and stared at their dark outlines.

Something was wrong. As he came closer he realized what it was. The gates. They were not tightly closed. Instead they were moving through a jerky cycle, like the wings of some great maimed bird. While his car crept closer the barred gates came to maximum aperture, held for a second, then swung quickly in to clash shut.

He drove to within ten feet of the gates, left the engine running, and stepped out of the car. No other vehicle tracks were visible, entering or leaving the estate. The metal sentry-box was in its usual position, covered with driven snow. He walked to stand shivering in front of it. Instead of the usual request for identification he heard a sinister mechanical growling, its volume changing in a cadence that matched the moving gates.

Within a few seconds his feet, already chilled from the journey, were freezing. He hurried back to the Lamborghini, held his hands for a second in front of the heater, backed the car up thirty feet, and waited. After a few seconds the gates began to open again. He eased the car forward in second gear, careful to avoid spinning the wheels on the untouched snow. By the time he reached the wide-open gates he was traveling at maybe twenty miles an hour. He went safely through before they again began to close.

He drove the rest of the way to the house, parked, and ran to the main door. It was not locked, and like the main gates it was opening and closing in an irregular rhythm. No time to worry about guards. He waited for his moment and darted inside. In the entrance, the level of the lights flickered and fluctuated, in that same strange cycle. He dashed across the stone floor and headed straight along the corridor to Miriam Greenwood's study.

It was deserted. Silent and empty. For the first time in his experience, the wheelchair with its familiar, fragile occupant was not there.

Matlock wiped the melted snow from his forehead, walked across to warm his hands on the hot-water radiators on the other side of the room, and stood frowning up at the TV monitors. They had never before been turned off, and now they were dark and silent.

A flicker of movement at the door caught his attention. Someone had hurried past along the corridor.

"Hey!" He ran across to the door. "Hey, you."

The man did not pause or turn around. He was wearing the white uniform of a nurse and carrying a shiny metal tray. His pace did not change. If he heard Matlock, he did not acknowledge it.

Matlock swore and started out after him. They were heading for the back of the house—towards the main medical area and surgery! Natu-

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rally. Matlock felt an enormous relief. If Miriam Greenwood needed an operation, that was exactly where Ronson should have taken her.

"Hey, wait for me." He called out again, and increased his pace. Still the man in front did not respond. He was moving in through the wide-open doors of the main treatment center and operating room. Half a dozen other white-clad figures were visible inside, and Matlock recognized Ronson's flaming red hair and broad back.

"How is she?" He started to ask questions before he was even in the room. "I was wondering on the way here about intracranial pressure. How much edema did you see? And how did the CAT scan look?"

She was there, as he had hoped and expected. Matlock pushed past the others and moved to her side.

They had not tried to take her out of her wheelchair. Instead they had moved the setting to a full reclining position, raising it to form a bed and, when necessary, an operating table. Her clothes had been cut away. The telemetry sensors, computer leads, catheters, and IV's of blood and antibiotics still hung from the chalk-white, skinny body and attached to the bare, delicate skull. Her eyes were closed and the whole upper rear of her braincase had been opened up. Matlock could see the pink-grey cerebral cortex, partly obscured by a darker stain of venous blood.

But was she alive? Matlock leaned closer. He could see her chest rising and falling with a now-familiar irregular rhythm. She ought to have died—days ago. But she had not. The will to live was in every harsh, shallow breath.

"How is she?" He repeated the question, realizing how foolish it was and suddenly aware that no one else had spoken since he came in. He stared around him for the first time.

Beyond Miriam Greenwood was a standard operating table, and on it stood a container of blood and a frightful jumble of organs and body parts. The organ bank?—except that Matlock had not yet begun to create it. What he was looking at had once been a man.

He turned and started to move away, but Ronson was right behind him. His white coat was filthy and blood-streaked, and a long yellow stain of urine ran down his left trouser leg. The red hair, always carefully styled and brushed, hung down in greasy locks across his forehead. Ronson's eyes were sunken and bloodshot, and there was a smear of blood on his unshaven left cheek.

"Test tissue type." The whispering came from all around, from every audio outlet. "Need a better match."

The white-clad figures in the room moved with the drunken gait of men who had been given no moment of rest for three days and nights, but they moved with perfect coordination. Suddenly there was a tight ring of people around Matlock, closing in on him.

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He backed away, shrinking from the touch of bloody hands. Soon he could go no farther. The wheelchair dug into his back.

He spun around in a frenzy. "Die." He screamed at Miriam Greenwood's unconscious body. "You monster. Die, damn you. Let them go."

Strong fingers were on his shoulders. His own hands grabbed at a cluster of IV's and jerked them out of the wasted arm. The hands that held him shivered and released their grip. All the lights in the room went out for a second, then flickered back to half-power.

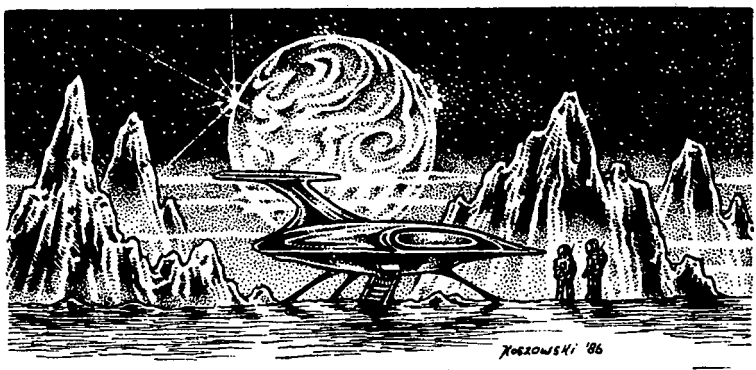
"Die, die, DIE." He was roaring at the top of his voice, but all the audio outlets in the room were screaming back in fury: *"Live, live, LIVE."*

He had his fingers at Miriam Greenwood's open skull, driving them toward the spongy brain tissue. He was pulled away. A dozen hands lifted him, carried him across to the operating table.

He dropped into a soggy welter of still-warm organs. He was held by his arms and legs so that he could not move. Above him the flickering lights of the room reflected from a gleaming scalpel. As the knife moved towards his throat, Matlock lifted his head. Six men were holding him, the seventh about to cut.

"No, no, stop." He jerked and writhed. "For God's sake, stop!"

The blade moved in. And all around the table the faces smiled down at him, with the serene ecstasy of a mother holding her first-born. ●



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TWO BAD DOGS

by Ronald Anthony Cross

The author's tales have been sold to *F&SF*, *Pulphouse*, and *Weird Tales*, and a collection of short stories should be out from *Pulphouse Author's Choice Monthly* some time next year.

art: Ron and Val Lakey Lindahn

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You have to understand that, while it is true that I do not particularly like dogs, I would never kick one. But if I were to make an exception, little Charlie Dog, as Melissa so lovingly calls him, would probably still be out there, blazing across the sky like a doggie meteor.

Like most people of sensitivity, I had made the aesthetic decision at an early age to admire the cat and disdain the lowly servile panting dog. Man's best friend, my ass; more like man's best groveling lackey.

Anyway, home from a hard day's work interviewing maniacs (I am a reporter for the *National Revealer),* I opened the door to my duplex apartment, prepared for another bout with the wretched little creature.

Since I had been unable to talk—no, beg—Melissa out of leaving the nasty wee beastie with me while she rushed off to the bedside of her ailing father somewhere in Iowa, I could only pray each night that he would die quickly (and painlessly, of course). (Either the dog or the father would do.)

So I peeked in my doorway—no sign of the little bugger. I called out my usual greeting, "Bad dog!" and waited for the reaction. Tiny as he was, it was always wise to locate him before entering a room. No reply.

I tried "Charlie, where are you, you little swine, you miniature pig, you ugly little minute gargoyle?"

I heard the low growling that is his trademark. Sounded like the bedroom. So I confidently entered the house, scrutinizing the living room rug for dog shit. No—perhaps I hadn't fed him enough.

Might as well get it over with, I figured, heading into the bedroom.

"Where are you? Reveal thy ugly self, oh pigdog."

A creature resembling a rat with curly hair popped out from under my bed, growling, furiously shaking something white as if it were a small animal (smaller than even itself) that it wished fervently to dismember. It took me a moment to recognize my underpants.

I shuddered to think what the nasty little creature had been doing all day long with my underwear. And as if in answer, Charlie Dog tossed them to the floor and hunched over them, attempting sexual union. Luckily my underwear had no more interest in the disgusting little creature than any small dog would have had, so the marriage pretty much went unconsummated.

"Ah, Charlie, true love at last, eh? Give me my underwear."

Charlie crouched down over my underpants, growling, his little lip raised perfectly in a snarl.

With what must have been divine inspiration, I jerked the spread off the bed and threw it over him like a net. The small lump squirmed and thrashed about, barking in his sharp staccato style, either in panic or

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delight. I can't tell the difference, and I doubt whether Charlie Dog can either.

With some pleasure, I watched him going through his little fit, pleasantly muffled by the bedspread, until the image of myself springing off the bed and landing on that pathetic little lump appeared in my consciousness: I went swiftly out into the living room before it became too compelling for me to resist. (Not long, I'll bet!)

I sat down on the shabby old couch (was it my imagination, or did it bear the slight odor of Charlie's special perfume?). I closed my eyes. Started to drowse. Was of course awakened by another fusillade of earsplitting little barks. The creature was prancing up and down stiff-legged in front of me on the rug. When he was convinced that he had gained my full attention, he ran into the kitchen. It was especially irritating to here the little clippity-scratchy noise of his toenails on the linoleum. Dinner.

"He'll only eat hamburger, cooked well done—Oh, I almost forgot, must be heavily salted," Melissa had informed me as she was going out the door. *Sure he will, he'd probably eat Purina rat chow and think it was a gourmet meal,* I figured. As usual, I had figured wrong.

I'd started out with canned dog food. "Dig right in, Charlie Dog. Good boy, good dog. Eat. Sit. Sit. Eat. Stand up and eat."

Charlie always wore an aggravated expression—aggravation was the key to his cuteness—but in this case it had surged clearly over the line and well into the territory of revulsion. No go. As was the attempt to feed him the hamburger raw. As was the attempt to feed him the hamburger well done, until I realized that I had forgotten to salt it.

I had recently interviewed a woman for the *Revealer* who claimed to have been five hundred years old. "Never touch meat," she had told me, "that's the secret."

"You've never eaten meat," I said, "in five hundred years?"

"You miss the point." She shook her head at me. "I said, 'Never *touch* meat.' Filthy stuff. Rotting away, dead as a doornail. Once you touch it, it *infects* you. It's too late then to worry about whether you eat it or not. You might as well do anything you want with it *then*. Rub it all over your body," she suggested. "Stuff it up your nose. Who cares?

"Have a brief but merry life," she had mumbled to me as I went out the door. She had died within the week. Perhaps even talking about it had de-immortalized her.

Anyhow, I always thought about her as I prepared Charlie's repast. I'm not a vegetarian, far from it. But there's something in mucking about with raw hamburger that gives me the creeps. As apparently it also did to Charlie Dog. He wouldn't go near it until it was thoroughly cooked and salted. But once its aroma informed him that it had reached its

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proper state of preparation, he would relay the info to me by frantically leaping into the air and, of course, barking. Barking, barking, barking.

All this would be followed by a brief respite as the tiny beast from hell ate its din din. That night I was particularly tired, as I've already pointed out. I made it back to the couch and had barely closed my eyes—or so it seemed—when, guess what? Bark, bark, bark.

Now it was time for the familiar ritual of Charlie Dog convincing me of the necessity of taking him on his nightly walk.

If the dinner routine required a lot of passionate barking and leaping about, the after-dinner "go for a walk" number might have been choreographed by some top Russian gymnast, and Charlie performed it as if he were competing for the doggie gold medal. First he would bark (then he would bark, then he would *bark,* etc.), then he would throw himself down and writhe on the carpet as if in his death throes (I wish), then spring up in the air, twisting around and around; he practically did handsprings—I expected to find myself jumping up to my feet and holding out a sign that read "9.5."

Outside for our walk next, where Charlie would finally settle on the perfect spot and make a big scene in order to draw attention to himself as he performed the wonderful (to him) art of defecation. Tonight, under the careful scrutiny of a very angry-looking old lady.

"Young man," she said to me after the sordid little affair was over, "have you no respect for the rights of others? You should pick it up and take it home with you, and dispose of it properly."

"You may have it," I snarled back at her. "Do with it as you wish."

Back home I sank down on the couch and closed my eyes again. *I've been working too hard,* I thought to myself. Working for the *National Revealer* was turning into more and more of a Herculean chore, and I was a small Hercules. A very small Hercules. A very, *very* small Hercules. In fact, in my drowsy state of consciousness, I allowed myself to wonder for a moment if part of the reason for my intense dislike of Charlie Dog didn't have something to do with my own diminutive size. A spry little (albeit incredibly handsome) fellow with a feisty little toy poodle seemed to present an insurmountable barrier to whatever the hell it was I was trying to prove to the world. But what if Charlie had been a big macho stud pit bull dog? Named Duke?

I drowsed. Images of all the maniacs and movie stars I had interviewed lately poured through my mind. (The difference between the movie stars and the maniacs had turned out to be more a matter of degree than kind. The movie stars, like the emperors of that other Hollywood in old Italy, were suffering from the severest possible form of mental illness: public supported insanity.)

Suddenly I awoke with a start. Something small but heavy and warm

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was curled up on my chest. Charlie Dog. When I looked at him, he growled menacingly.

I jumped up, and Charlie did a doggie flip, landing quite skillfully, I must admit, but complaining nonetheless in his bitter way. Bark bark, etc.

"Late for my interview, Charlie. At least it's not a movie star this time. Thank God."

Charlie said, or anyway seemed to say: Interview, *this* time of night? Who do you think you're kidding? But quick as a wink, I was out the door and on my way. Walking. Someone in L.A. actually lived close enough for me to walk to their house.

Soon there I was, in her house, sitting there comfy and cozy on her plush sofa, holding my pad, pen, and getting ready to fire off some of those deep questions the *National Revealer* is so famous for, such as: "What makes you think the bugs in your kitchen are actually advanced beings from Mars?" or "Then what happened to the *real* Mike Tyson?" or "If everyone is under their spell, then how come we don't *know* it?" Tonight it was, "Well, I hear you've had an unfortunate accident with your dog." But I figured I'd break one of my long-standing rules and use a little finesse with this one. Lead into it.

"Lovely place you've got here." (Slight exaggeration, but what the hell.) Actually, the woman was making me a little nervous. Big (well—bigger than me), rangy, and with kind of a fey look in her huge dark eyes. Not at all unlike some of those whacko movie stars I had been interviewing of late. And restless. She kept moving about the living room, picking things up and putting them down, lifting up the blind and peeking out into the dark.

"Do you live near here?" she said. And there was a strange intensity in her voice.

"Not too near," I lied carefully.

"Do you want a drink? I think we should have a drink. Sort of break the ice between us."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't drink."

"But you should, you really should. People who drink live longer, you know."

It only seems longer, I said to myself.

"Here's just a little bitty one I made for you." She loped across the expanse of rug and shoved a glass in my hand. I caught a whiff of it and practically reeled—rubbing alcohol and soda?

"There," she said quite forcefully, "that's better, isn't it?"

I nodded. Then she did a very odd thing. She turned around in a circle a couple of times before she sat down next to me on the couch, and curled up with her knees up to her chest; her feet were bare.

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"Much better," she said, and I thought, not for the first time, what a strange husky voice she had.

"I really like being here with you, Eddie, feeling so relaxed, well, I feel like I can just let my hair out, you know?"

"Down," I said.

"What?" she said, looking angry again.

"It's 'let your hair down,' Ms. Lombardo."

"Oh, please call me Cindy," she said. "Drink up."

I pretended to sip from the glass—Jesus, the fumes burned my eyes.

"Well, Cindy, I have some questions I have to ask. We might as well get started."

"Sure," she said, "I'm ready to let my hair out—I mean down. Silly me. Wonder why I keep saying that?"

"What exactly was it that happened between you and your dog?"

She said coyly, "I told you over the phone. Don't you want to drink up?"

I had put my drink down on the coffee table in order to pick up my pad and pen.

"I want to be sure I got it right. Would you mind telling me again?"

"I killed my dog," she said. "I bit him to death."

"Was he a bad dog?—Sorry. I mean, Was he a big dog?"

"Doberman pinscher," she said, and she smiled wickedly. "I'm quite strong, you know."

"I believe you," I said, noticing a bit of trepidation creeping into my tone of voice. Was I imagining it, or was there more hair on her arms and legs than I had noticed before?

"But it's not the strength, you know, it's something else. Sometimes a kind of wildness comes over me, and—I don't know how to describe it. It's as if someone else is doing those things."

"A kind of wildness came over you, Cindy," I said, writing it down. "Then exactly what happened?"

"I don't really remember it that clearly." She looked away, got up and crossed the room and peeked out the window again. What did she see out there in the dark?

"Prince was barking at me, for some reason. I . . . I just can't remember why. Barking and snarling, but backing up. Then we were fighting, and I was biting into his neck. I remember that for sure. I was just so damn furious. I remember the taste of his blood."

She licked her lips. Oh my God, she licked her fucking lips! I felt hair rise up all over my body. In places where I probably didn't even *have* hair. Suddenly I was seriously frightened. But at the same time I was writing it down. Digging it. Thinking, *"Woman Bites Dog to Death": great headline.* It's what I do.

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"This . . . uh . . . wildness that comes over you, have you noticed when it occurs, by chance?"

"Always at night," she said. "Let me think for a minute." She got up, loped over, looked out the window.

"What's out there?"

"Full moon."

Jesus! My hair fluttered all over my body again.

"Does the full moon have . . . "

"You know," she said, looking astonished, "I do believe it might have something to do with it at that."

Came back over and sat down next to me, and smiled and knocked down the huge drink she had made herself, and then said: "Full moon, drinking whiskey, stuff like that."

I had stopped writing, stopped breathing. For a while we just sat there in silence. Then I said, "Uh, probably PMS."

"Do you know what I want you to do?" she said.

"Uh, write up your story and publish . . ."

Her expression became very angry very suddenly.

"Shut up," she said. "I want you to shut up and drink your drink and stand up without saying another word and take off all your clothes and then tear mine off of me. Just rip them off."

"Oh," I said. "Oh, oh, oh."

"You *bastard.* You men are all alike," she said. "All you can think about is sex, sex, sex."

But it was death, death, death that I was thinking about. All I could manage to say was "Oh." I couldn't even get out the "my God" part. And yes, her arms and legs were definitely getting hairier, and her face—oh my *God,* her face was changing shape, and hair was now growing on it too. Thick, dark hair.

"Sex, sex, sex." That hoarse low voice of hers was practically growling now. "You're all panting like dogs with your tongues all hanging out." She began to pant in order to illustrate her lovely simile, tongue lolling out, and it was too long—way too long.

"Oh shit, it's happening, it's happening!" she shouted suddenly. "Yes, *yes,* let it, I *want* it to happen! Oh, oh shit."

Now she curled up and rolled off the couch and down onto the carpet.

"Come here," I think she said. But I could no longer understand her. She lay there writhing and groaning.

I broke out of my trance, threw down my drink, and tried to make a dash for the front door. But she came out of it enough to spring at me, causing me to turn and run the other way. The kitchen! But the back door was locked. Dead bolt. Oh Jesus, Jesus! I just froze up again, pushing at the door. Got to think think think.

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The swinging door that led to the living room opened, and there she was, growling at me. The transformation was complete now, and strangely enough, she didn't look anything like a wolf, but a lot like werewolves look on TV or in the movies. I think maybe she could have changed into any form she wanted, but, not knowing this, patterned herself after the movie version. Figures!

Oh my God, what am I going to do? She took a step toward me. Growling. Stalking me. Playing with me, actually. I scanned the kitchen frantically for a weapon. There was poor Prince's food dish. A Doberman! And on the shelf next to me, a few cans of his food and a can opener.

So I grabbed the opener and frantically started opening a can. The creature growled, but clearly was puzzled.

"Good dog," I said. "Good Cindy. Eat, Cindy. Eat. Good dog."

I practically ripped the can open, and just dumped the food on the floor in front of me. "Eat, Cindy. Eat," I said again.

Her growl changed to a whining noise.

"Yes, yes. Good dog. Eat, Cindy. Good Cindy."

The creature took another step toward me, then suddenly dropped down on the shiny yellow kitchen linoleum floor and began to scarf up the dog food. To tell you the truth, it smelled pretty good to me, too.

But she was gobbling it up too fast. Like most animals, she had atrocious manners.

I opened another can and tossed it on the floor. Then I carefully edged my way around her and tip-toed out through the kitchen door. Then I ran like hell for the front door, and then I ran like hell all the way home. We're talking a couple of miles here. Probably three-minute ones.

For the first time in my life I was glad to see Charlie. Home sweet home.

"Thank God I didn't tell her where I lived, Charlie." *Is there some way she could get my address?* I thought. *Calm down. You've got to think it out.* But there was no way. It's the middle of the night. And anyhow, it's the *Revealer's* policy never to give out any reporter's home address. Very strict policy. My breathing began to slow down. I was safe. Really safe.

Now I was feeling better. Still too shook up to sleep, but much better. I sat down in my chair again, and flicked on the TV, changed a few channels with my remote until I found a suitably dull sitcom, and put my feet up, shoes and all, on my coffee table, since there was no one to tell me not to. Pretty soon I started to doze again.

Suddenly there came a pounding at the front door, accompanied by Charlie Dog's frantic barking.

"Eddie, are you in there? It's me, Cindy. I've come to apologize. Won't you open the door, Eddie?"

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"No!" I shouted. "No, I won't open the door. How the hell did you get my address?"

"I called the *Revealer* and your boss was there, working late. I simply asked him."

"But that's against the *Revealer* policy," I whined.

"I know, he told me that, but I explained to him that I was very upset and all, and that I would find him and tear his throat out if he didn't tell me, and he just said, 'Sure, better him than *me*.' Now will you please open this door, Eddie, because I'm starting to get very angry again, and I'm afraid I'll lose control out here and do something that might embarrass you in front of your neighbors."

And do you know, the funny thing, the absolutely insane thing is, that I did open the door. Because somehow I couldn't stand the thought of her changing into an animal in front of my neighbors. I almost felt that I would rather be killed than get thrown out of my apartment in disgrace. But I only opened the door a crack.

"What do you want?"

A crack was enough. With astonishing ease she shoved the door the rest of the way open, popping off the little chain, and knocking me clear off my feet.

"I want *you,* you son of a bitch," she said. Her fists were clenched, and yes, her garden of hair was beginning to sprout again.

"You think you can just take advantage of me and then throw me aside like an old used—" She searched wildly for a simile "—tampax. Just leave me laying there, right there where you'd had your way with me. Right there on the kitchen linoleum floor."

She was changing fast. I scanned the living room desperately for silver bullets or crucifixes, and had just about the kind of luck you'd imagine I'd have.

For once, Charlie Dog was not barking. He was just frozen there with his mouth, or snout or whatever you like to call it, open. Wide open.

I ran over and scooped him up. "Here, Cindy. *Eat*. Good Cindy." I tossed Charlie toward her.

Sure enough, the little demon quickly mastered his uncharacteristic reticence, scampered over, and tried to couple with one of her now-quite-hairy legs. Jesus, what a sex maniac.

"Sorry, Charlie, but you've been such a bad dog," I whispered as way of good-bye, while edging my way toward the bedroom door.

And . . . tender last scene, the last thing I saw as I carefully inched through the doorway was the bitch growling down at Charlie, who, of course, was still lost in the raptures of love.

Then I was hiding under the bed, praying to whatever God there was (or wasn't) that she'd be satisfied with the little snack I'd offered her.

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Hours later, when I was finally able to drum up the courage to go back out and check, the front door was open, and the two bad dogs were gone. Charlie, I was sure, forever. If only I would be so fortunate with Cindy.

In fact, I was so certain she had eaten him, that he no longer existed, that I put him totally and completely out of my mind, so that when my girlfriend Melissa called me on the phone and asked about her little—ugh—poochie pie, I was stunned. What do I do now?

"Oh, poochie pie's fine. Just fine. We're getting along just great, aren't we, Charlie Dog?"

I held the phone away from me and attempted to imitate his annoying little bark.

Strangely enough, she said, "Yeah, he sounds okay, I guess. You're not forgetting to take him for his walk, are you? And remember, he likes to be brushed around 7:15 in the morning," etc., etc. Daddy, it appeared, was still busy dragging out his death scene. (Positively Shakespearean!) Well, okay. I'd postpone telling her about Charlie till the last possible moment. I breathed a sigh of relief. I always feel so much better once I come up with a plan.

A few nights later came a thumping at my door. Not a pounding. But a thumping and a scratching.

Panic. "Who's there? Cindy, is that you?"

"No, it's not Cindy, you fool. Open the door. It's me."

"Ah, who's 'me'?"

"It's *me,* damn it. Charlie."

"Sure it is," I said. I opened the door and looked out. What I saw was the body of a poodle—yes, it could be Charlie's—the tiny little body of a toy poodle, but grotesquely crowned with a pale white, puffy, ugly human face.

"I've become a were-human," it whined in an anguished tone.

II: Charlie's Story

"Right at first I have only dog's memories. Feelings. Impressions. Odors. Anger. Fear. More emotions. In short, like a human's memories, only without the neurotic ability to fantasize and make a little story out of the whole affair with me at the center of it. And then tell it to myself over and over until I believe it. Well, those simple sweet doggie days are gone.

"I ran with the bitch. I wanted to screw her, but I couldn't reach her." (Yeah, it was Charlie, all right.) "But really the excitement was enough. The running, the hunting, the odors.

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"During the day she was like an ordinary human being with a hangover. But not quite. She was always on the verge. She reeked of fury. I loved to smell her. Human on the outside, wolf within. She would wander about the house, pretending to be a human, but with the restlessness of a wolf, prowling her territory, pacing back and forth, muttering to herself, emitting little electrical surges of anger from time to time. Trying to be human. But really, she was just waiting for the night. The hunt. The kill. The blood.

"The two of us would corner our victims, slowly and tantalizingly advancing, driving them farther and farther out of themselves and into the limitless void of pure panic. How we would drink in those perfumed clouds of panic and despair. Then, when it was so delicious that we could stand it no more, we would attack: She, going for the throat; I, the foot.

"How I loved the bitch. But as always, each dog kills the thing he loves. Or, as in my case, tries. Driven over the edge by blood lust, I turned on her, savagely going for the ankle.

"The next thing I knew, I was swimming, semi-conscious, in a sea of pain, captured tightly in a vice of needle-sharp teeth and being shaken as if I were a rat.

"If she hadn't tried to swallow me, I wouldn't have escaped. But luckily for me, she was invested with the strange power to alter her structure to a most amazing degree. In my case, she stretched out and widened her jaws, and made the ludicrous attempt to swallow me whole. Of course she choked, gagged, and coughed me out. I was shot out of her mouth like a projectile, and the shock of hitting the cold concrete floor of the alley forced me back into consciousness. I managed to scramble between some trash cans stacked up in the alley and make a run for it. I heard her smash into the trash cans and go down. When I glanced back I could see she had momentarily forgotten all about me, and was now venting her rage upon the trash.

"I almost died. But the wound inflicted by a werewolf is a supernatural wound, and it either kills you or it heals supernaturally fast. I found myself another alley nearby and crawled into it, and hid myself as best I could and prepared to die.

"By the next night, I was coming out of it, but something else was happening. Something weird. All of my memories were being sorted out and put into order. Not necessarily proper order, you understand? It was rather an arbitrary order, chosen to make the past more pleasant and meaningful. Some memories were suppressed, others exaggerated, emphasized. It was an attempt to make something more important than it really was. Me. The concept of me-I was what the process was trying to emphasize, what it was making into the center of the universe. And the universe, and the center, the 'I,' were both only a part of that process.

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It was all illusion, but it was inevitable, inexorable illusion that forced you to accept it as the truth. It was later that I realized what it was: I was becoming human.

"I was now able to put together the proper set of memories and attempt to find my way back to your apartment. Well, here I am. Feed me."

I fed him. And he gobbled the well-done, highly salted hamburger down, same as always. But when he was finished he did a strange thing. He wept, loud and long. It was an eerie sight to see: the puffy white lugubrious face distorted in anguish, the sniffling, snuffling, sobbing, and wailing emitting from it, while the nasty little poodle body scampered back and forth, back and forth restlessly bearing its awful burden.

"Why are you crying?" I said.

"It is a terrible thing to be human," he said, "trapped in your own deceit. It is a tragedy."

"Well, Charlie," I said, "it is indeed a tragedy. But if you could see yourself from my eyes, you would realize that it's a comedy, too."

But no, Charlie could not see it. It seems to be another sad or funny fact of human existence that it's only a comedy when someone *else* is suffering it.

Charlie paced back and forth anxiously in front of me, still weeping, while I did what I could—sat down on the sofa and dozed off again.

What woke me up was the silence. I live in L.A. There is *always* noise here: The hysterical scream of a siren, the angry honking of automobile horns (many of them blaring out novelty tunes such as "I Won't Be Home Until Morning"), the rumbling of earthquakes, the screams of your next door neighbor's wife, the crisp thunk of his fist connecting, the ripe thud of her body hitting the floor (or sometimes vice versa), the occasional punctuation of an assault rifle on full automatic.

It makes no difference what time it is; you go outside in the middle of the night and drive somewhere and you will find the freeways jammed with swearing sweating psychotics, leaning on their horns. It is always rush hour in L.A.

And even my apartment makes noise. It sways and grumbles and creaks and whispers and constantly shifts and moves about. Perhaps this is due to the jelly-like motion of the earth here: It is more like living on the ocean than near it.

At any rate, whether due to Charlie's new powers, me tuning in to his mystical brainwave broadcast, or whether it was just one of those freak L.A. accidents embellished with a touch of synchronicity, I awoke enveloped in a cloud of silence. Startled, I looked around the room. Charlie had reverted back to his dog form, and was asleep on the rug. I couldn't even hear him breathe. I couldn't see anything unusual. I thought, *What*

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does this mean? And the answer, the overwhelming answer, came flooding into my mind: *Get up and run!*

But I couldn't move, couldn't scream, couldn't even breathe, because I was frozen with fear. Oh yes, because I *knew* what was coming through the door. Now. Now. *Now.*

I just sat there, mouth open, eyes opening wider and wider, staring at that door, and listening to the first sound in that sea of silence: not the howl of a wolf, but a keening, high-pitched shriek of an unknown carnivore closing in fast upon its quarry. And I watched the door explode off its hinges—I saw this so clearly that it appeared to me as if it were a film on television being played in slow motion. And then *she* was in the room, and I began to breathe, only too fast. Too fast.

And now she reared back and spread her hairy arms in a world-encompassing gesture and howled, not anything like the howl of a wolf, but so high-pitched, loud and uncanny that you could feel the sound vibrations coursing through your body like a paralyzing charge of electricity. You just sat there, breathing, breathing, waiting, panting.

And suddenly something floated between us, something so ludicrous that I couldn't register it at first, and just saw it as a distortion of vision between me and the werewolf. Then I felt the pressure, a terrible surging pressure like an instant migraine headache, complete with flashing lights. And things in the room started exploding: One by one, the glasses on the shelf, followed by the decanter and the lamp on the coffee table (the table flew up and smashed into the wall); the little thirteen-inch TV blew to smithereens; and last, the lightbulb in the ceiling fixture popped.

And now I could see what it was that had come floating between the bitch and her prey: It was Charlie Dog in his were-human form, and the reason I could see it was because the white puffy pliable face was radiating a sickly cloud of brilliant light.

I could see him, and I could see the bitch struggling as if against an unseen barrier, and I could hear her roar in rage and frustration, and then, still struggling, emit a series of nasty growls and snarls; and finally, in what sounded like the severely-damaged voice of someone suffering from some awful disease, she grunted something that I thought could have been "Fucking men and their dogs, fucking dogs and their men. Kill, kill, kill . . ."

"Put your hand in your mouth," Charlie said in his strange, small, shrill, but sweet voice.

Slowly, but inexorably, struggling wildly like a fish in a net, she put her hairy hand in her mouth.

"Bite down," Charlie said. And as she did it, he shouted in a crisp tone of voice, "Bad dog!"

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She bit down hard; there was a loud crunching sound, and blood poured out, a lot of it. And Charlie shouted out once again, "Bad, *bad* dog. Go home, bad dog!"

And she turned and ran out the door.

"Is that all you can do?" Charlie said, "Just sit there and hyperventilate?" As if released from a spell, I jumped up and ran into the bathroom and threw up. When I came back out, he said:

"Don't worry, she won't come back. It's simply a matter of knowing how to train a dog."

Then he circled wearily around and around and curled up on the rug. For a few moments he lay there, weeping softly; and as I watched, his puffy white face disassembled like a cloud, and reformed into the face of Melissa's darling little Charlie doggie. He looked at me imploringly and whined, and then closed his great sad eyes and slept.

And that should have been the end of the story. You would think it was enough, but no such luck. Things keep on happening even when you think they just ought to stop and give you a break for a while. Especially then.

Of course I called the police. "Jeez, too bad, we're all out of silver bullets," the voice over the phone snarled, as the cop slammed down the receiver.

"We can't just leave her loose, out there," I said.

"What else can we do?" Charlie answered. "We saved ourselves from the evil that attempted to destroy us. The world outside is full of killers. What else can we do?"

But there was something I could do. I could print the truth. I couldn't force anyone to believe it, but I could get it into print.

"Hey, Eddie," my boss said enthusiastically over the phone, " 'Liz Takes Bath in Front of Millions of Adoring Fans.'—Is that lead or is that *lead?"*

"How 'bout *this?"* I shot right back at him: " 'Woman Bites Dog, Bites Man, Bites Self.' " So it wasn't a lead story, but I got it in print. (The rest of it's up to you.)

And as for Charlie, as with the rest of the world, there was a whole lot too much going on, with no time-outs included in the deal. He was changing every night now. Developing into . . . we knew not what. He did not seem to be held back by any constraints emanating from the werewolf legend. It made no difference to him whether it was full moon or not, and garlic was fine as long as it was mixed in with properly prepared hamburger: Charlie was something brand new.

It was a few days later that I got the call. Charlie was in his doggie

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phase. But, as with Cindy, he was never quite all the way in one stage or the other: there was dog in the human, human in the dog. So he knew something was up with the phone call. He kept barking at me, staring at me with those huge dark inquisitive eyes. He was, of course, trying to speak.

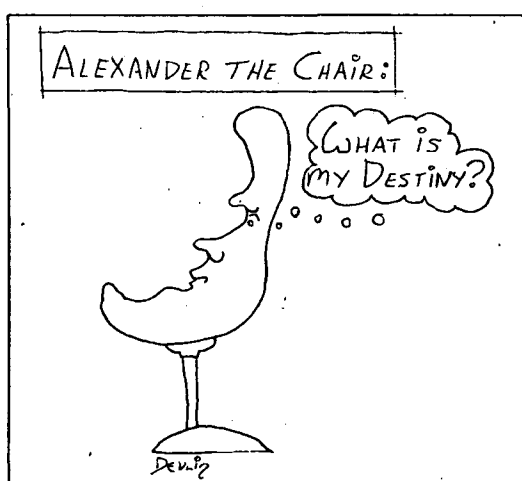
"It was Melissa," I said, hesitantly. "She, uh . . . well, Charlie, she was lying. Her father's not dying. He's not her father, he's some young stud she met at the disco. She's not coming back." I choked up, and for a moment I couldn't speak. Then I said: "I guess she's ditched us both."

Charlie whined and scampered out of the room. I could hear his little claws on the kitchen linoleum, the sound of him pacing back and forth. Back and forth. But later, when I drowsed off as usual, and woke up to find him curled up asleep in my lap, his face was once again the face of a human: but not the same human.

"Not to worry, Charlie," I was amazed to hear myself say. "We'll stick together, you and me. Ride it out. All of it, to the very end."

The eyes blinked open, and the human face yawned. The tortured eyes stared into mine for what seemed to me like a very long time.

"You poor human sap, don't you know that there's no such *thing* as an end?" he said finally. And then closed his weary eyes again. And slept. ●



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THE LANDER'S SOLILOQUY

on the dry seabed
I unearth your portrait
Smooth plastiglass
Warped in the shape of a wing

A mad king in half profile
Seated on a dais—the laboring throngs
Beseeching, flicker in flame
Round the base

For hours I studied the crumpled parchment
Of your face
As it mouthed the ceremonial words

Tyrant who reversed history
to the year zero

While your buried image
Cycled through the same gestures
hand-sweeps
That orchestrated a symphony of planets

The sun has become unstable
A dull ruby hid inside a nest
Of silver snake-like prominences

Earth's atmosphere has boiled away
in howling choirs

Now I listen to your radio monument
Sing eternal praise
a tesseract turning in the night

—Andrew Joron

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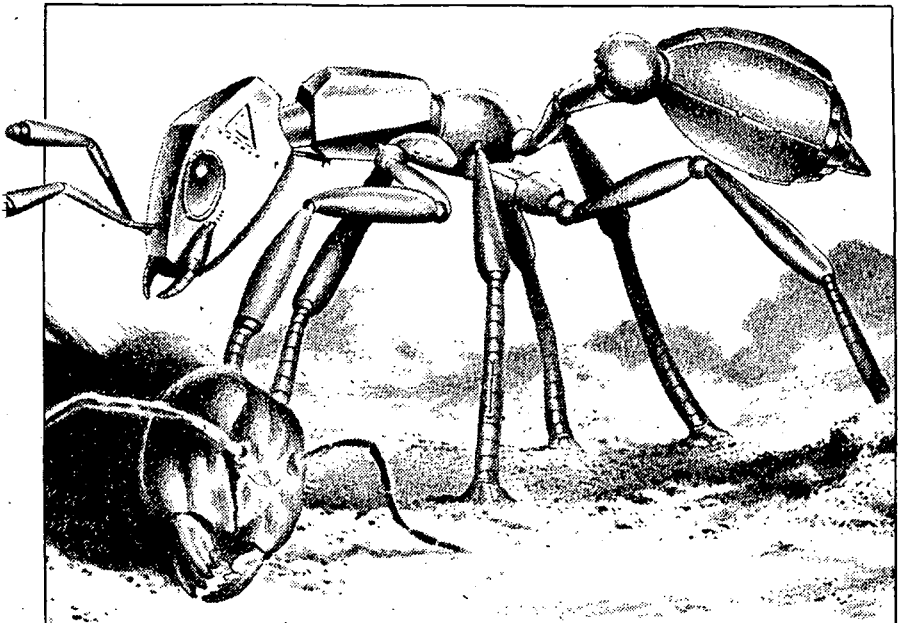

FOR NO REASON

by Patricia Anthony

In her first tale for *IAsfm*, Patricia Anthony deftly explores a seemingly incomprehensible divide separating two species. Ms. Anthony's previous publications include stories in *Aboriginal SF*, *Weird Tales*, and *F&SF*.

art: Bob Walters

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A few yards into the tunnel, there was a dead pharaoh. It lay on its side, both antennae ripped away, the round, pebbly eyes tweezered out. From the scent, the body had been killed elsewhere and dragged to this place. It was a billboard of sorts. Without tasting the chemical signs that had been left, Morgan could read the typical invicta warning; what would have been a crude warning for man, but was a terrifyingly sophisticated warning for ants.

If the invictas caught a spy, they cut out his tongue and gouged out his eyes.

DON'T FUCK WITH US, the warning said.

Morgan took a narrow side tunnel that led to an abandoned food chamber. The room stank of battle.

Most of the brown pharaohs had been carried away to be eaten. The invictas weren't choosy about meals, and they needed the chitin, anyway.

But in the sand of the tunnel the pharaohs had left their dying last words, not as profound as some of the messages often left by their attackers, but still poignant. The first to enter the chamber had only the time for a chemical scream. The rest, outnumbered, bewildered by their defeat, had stroked the soil with their slow agony.

Morgan was glad to see a few bright red bodies littering the chamber floor. The pharaohs had lost, of course, but they had taken some of the invaders with them.

In their sense of justice, the invictas were barbarians; but in their battles, they were as perfectly organized as the old Roman army. This nest of pharaohs, like all the rest the invictas had invaded, had never had a chance. At the end, the pharaohs had known it. Resignation had been left scrawled in the sand of the chamber.

There were three exits from the room. Morgan dug his sensors into the dirt at the mouth of each. The taste didn't tell him much. The victorious army had divided and taken all three routes home.

They knew he was coming.

He chose the middle exit and stepped forward cautiously. A few yards into it, the tunnel began to narrow until the dirt brushed his legs to either side. He negotiated a difficult ninety-degree turn and suddenly his headlights lit up a wall to his front. He groped forward and touched his sensors to the fresh earth of the cave-in.

His name was written there.

Backpedal. His legs butted against the tight walls. Sand grains clicked as they fell against his metal hide.

He knew what would come next.

Frantically, he dug a little chamber for himself, large enough for him to turn around. The lights set above his optical scanners dipped and rose

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as he shifted, making the shadows dance. He twisted, bent in half, and suddenly he was stuck.

Looking over his shoulder, he found himself staring into the expressionless eyes of invictas.

There were three of them; two tagged with blue stripes; one tagged yellow. The yellow one moved. His forelegs scraped at the ceiling. At last, too late, Morgan noticed the dirt walls of the tunnel were new. They had never really been tightly packed.

A blue-striped ant rose to help the first. The two were prying at a sand grain the size of a boulder that was set into the ceiling.

Morgan was fighting to flip himself over and free his rear legs, fighting so hard he feared he was about to cause his own avalanche.

The boulder dropped a little. The invictas backed up quickly and stood waiting. But Murphy's Law caught up with them. The boulder, in dropping, had crushed two smaller grains together, and the grains had formed a makeshift latch. The latch was stuck on CLOSED.

Morgan's foreleg was wedged between the tunnel wall and his shoulder. He shifted his weight furiously back and forth.

An invicta, number three, stepped foward and reached up, up for the precariously balanced lever. The delicate red foreleg touched the rock.

Morgan reared. His body popped free.

The ant tugged. There was a grinding sound. A ghostly puff of dust dropped onto the invicta's glossy back.

"NO!" Morgan screamed.

With a crack, the boulder fell. After a brief hesitation, the tunnel went with it..

Novotny was staring into Morgan's face, the remote helmet in his hand. "So. You lost another one."

Still streaming tears, Morgan bent over. He gulped air and blinked at the light. Once, just for fun, Novotny had left him buried for over an hour.

"How many this month?" Shirley asked in her deep alto voice.

On the other side of the room, the techs were still laughing.

Novotny was laughing, too. "Should have seen your face."

Morgan took another deep breath. The room smelled of stale cigarette smoke and plastics. He coughed, raised his eyes, and stared for a moment at Shirley. The lab coat nearly swallowed her. He noticed how curiously small she was: Small for a worker; much too tiny for a female.

"I can't believe they buried you again," Shirley said.

Novotny chuckled, "The invictas tell me, 'We'll bury you.' Just like another old red, Nikita K., used to say."

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Morgan's hands trembled as he peeled the leads from his fingers. It took two tries before he made it up out of the chair.

Shirley followed him out of the room. "I noticed in the monitor that Blue Nest warriors have integrated fully with Yellow. That's why they're on this territorial kick with the Pharoahs. The nest needs more space. We'll knock off for today. I'll send for another unit and we'll go in tomorrow morning to see if they're food-gathering with Yellow, too. Then we'll get the queens."

He stumbled into the locker room. Shirley, who was not squeamish about those things, followed. She watched as he peeled off his wet shirt.

"Scares the shit out of you, doesn't it?" she asked.

Morgan sniffed cautiously at the shirt, grimaced and tossed it to a pile of dirty towels at the side of the bench. He unzipped his fly, ran out of energy all of a sudden, and had to sit down quickly. He put his head in his hands.

"You still think they sucker you in?"

"Yes," he whispered.

They knew his name. It had been written on the end of the tunnel. *This one's for you,* they'd said.

"Well, burying you is their only way of fighting back. Nobody ever said ants were completely stupid."

The invictas knew his name, but not his human one. They'd made one up for him, and now the taste of that new name was more familiar than the sound of his old.

Some things, of course, were beyond the invictas' understanding. They knew of war, certainly. They knew about killing. It was motiveless murder they didn't understand.

Morgan neither ate nor did he invade. When the workers were tagged and the nest was empty of queens and eggs he walked away, leaving stunned turmoil behind him.

Had they known the term they would have called him Serial Murderer. As it was, they took the essence of what he was doing and called him by the scent-name For No Reason.

His very name was the question they longed to ask him: *Why?*

An invicta could have understood the human robber killing for money. They certainly would have understood the plea of self defense. But what Morgan was doing was a type of murder not even humans understand.

For absolutely no reason.

He figured the invictas thought he was crazy. He knew Shirley thought he was.

Morgan was so tired that it was an effort for his mouth and tongue to form the words: "They know when I'm coming."

"Yeah. No surprise. That's what this research is all about, isn't it?

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Finding out how they set up communications. When the queens are dead, the colony is dead, right? And the survivors have to move it or loose it. Question is, how do they integrate and why do the other nests let the alien workers in? Myself, I think it's for entertainment value. S. Invictas are like Boy Scouts around a campfire. They get out their marshmallows and listen to horror stories the new guys tell about you."

He stood up, swayed for a moment, and then dropped his pants. With his undershorts still on, he walked into a shower. He turned on the water, slipped off his jockey shorts and tossed them over the opaque glass door.

"Hey! Watch it!" Shirley shouted.

With the hot water beating into his face, Morgan leaned against the tile wall, closed his eyes and laughed silently. In a moment the edges of his lips pulled down and, still without sound, he was sobbing.

There was a soft thud. Shirley had thrown his shorts against the shower door. "Jesus Christ," she whispered in disgust.

He wiped his face. "You just going to stand there? You coming in here with me, or what?"

There was a muttered reply.

"If you don't want my bod, then what is it you want?"

"It is your bod, Morgan. It always was your bod. You're going in tomorrow, right?"

He took a bottle of shampoo from a side ledge and squeezed some onto his hand. It was a woman's shampoo that was pink and smelled like a discount whorehouse. After a hesitation, he wiped it over his head.

"You're the best robot manipulator we've got. And you understand the damned fire ants."

Morgan had become sensitive to smells. The musk scent of the shampoo nearly made him sick. He quickly worked it into a lather and rinsed.

Scents. That's how the ants spoke, in scents. Morgan could read them, but in the land of the ants he was mute. If he could tell the invictas anything, it would be to get out of the cities while they could. He'd tell them to go back to the country while they still had a chance, even though the *Solenopsis invicta*-specific poison was there. When Shirley and the others figured out how the nests worked, the invicta would have no chance.

Invictas were taking over the household nesting spots of the pharaohs, the Argentines, the carpenters. They had left the pastures and were fucking with human habitats, and the humans were finally pissed. That's why Shirley was studying them so intently; and that's why Morgan was murdering them.

He *did* have a reason. However convoluted, murderers always do. He just couldn't explain.

"I always come back, don't I?" he asked.

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"Yeah. I just keep thinking that one day you won't."

"Maybe I won't. But it won't be tomorrow."

In a minute, he heard the locker room door creak shut.

The wide treeless expanses of the suburbs bothered him, but the day made up for it. The clouds were low, the dusk light deceptive as if it were about to storm. In the distance, Dallas rose like a shrouded specter; and the proscribed path of Central Expressway was a river of small, bright bodies: Red ones heading north; white ones heading south.

He took the Greenville exit and entered the closely-packed apartments by The Village. The joggers had gone in, but the dogwalkers were out en masse. He walked quickly from his car to his darkened living room and peered into the light beyond the breakfast bar, watching Donna move, an ant behind glass.

She left dinner simmering and came out into the living room with him. "Home early. You want a drink?"

"Yes." Then he thought about it. "No."

She walked back in the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine. He followed.

At the stove she flinched away from him. "You stand too close, you know that? It's spooky."

He stepped a pace back and looked at her.

"Don't watch me. You're always *watching* me lately."

"Sorry," he said, and looked away, riveting his eyes to the picture on an empty tomato can.

Without warning, she was crying.

He was afraid to come too close; afraid to stare at her. "What is it?" he asked from a few feet away. The tomato can was green. The tomatoes were bright red. There was white and black writing across the front of the tomato picture.

"You're not a *human* any more, Stevie. You don't act like a human, you don't *think* like a human."

He wondered if it would be all right for him to look at her now. He tried it. She wasn't looking his way, anyway.

"Don't you know I love you?" he asked. He would die for her. He would kill for her. And he didn't understand why. All he knew was that Donna and the apartment were wrapped up into the same package in his mind. It upset him when she went out.

She was still crying, so he stepped forward, stood at her shoulder and ran a hand down her arm. Donna shivered and jerked away. He was confused because he thought he remembered that was the way he should act. "You don't want me to touch you?"

"Not like that."

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He was frightened, confused. "Like what?"

Donna rubbed her arm hard where his hand had been. "I don't know. It's a touch like feathers. I don't like it."

Because he couldn't understand what she wanted, Morgan left the kitchen. He sat contentedly in the living room and watched her move back and forth from the sink to the stove in her prescribed, safe place.

The drive back to Plano in the morning was disturbing. Above him the sun sat unblinking in the blue gaze of the autumn sky. The only gravity that kept Morgan from flying off the earth, the only power that kept him warm, was the traffic.

Inside the research station, Morgan started to calm. By the time he had eased himself into the chair and slipped the controls of the mini-robot onto his hands, his hands had stopped shaking. Shirley bent down with the helmet. At the last moment, he brought his palms up and pushed it away. The leads on his fingers clicked against the heavy plastic of the headgear.

"What do I look like?" he asked her.

Her eyebrows raised and lowered, doing a little formal dance of confusion. "Huh?"

"When I'm in command of the unit. What do I look like? I've never seen anyone do it. Do I look funny?"

She shrugged and put the helmet into his lap. It was heavy and no one, particularly the petite Shirley, could hold it for very long. "You twitch a little when you walk. You don't really take the steps. You know that. But your muscles and your arms act as if they do." She started to lift the helmet again.

He stopped her. "And when I kill?"

All animation left her face. "The mandibles are the thumb and forefinger of your right hand."

"I know."

"Then why do you ask?"

"I want to know how it looks to you."

"They move. Together and apart. It's not much to see, really."

He licked his lips nervously. "Do I smile when I do it?"

"No," she said softly. "No." Then she slipped the helmet over his head.

The maimed body of the pharaoh was still at the start of the tunnel. Morgan touched it as he went by. It didn't tell any new stories.

At the chamber, the death messages were already getting old and the invicta bodies had been carried away. He took the right hand corridor this time. The tunnel was old, well-used. He could taste the remains of pharaohs, the original builders, and the spicy tang of the new tenants.

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The pharaohs had left simple food markers, directional signals; the invictas had left tart splashes of paranoia.

After a few yards, the tunnel made a slow S curve downwards. In the center of the S, he caught the shadow of antennae coming his way. The invicta was on him before it knew he was there. It was a Yellow; and the job he had done of marking it, Morgan noticed, was sloppy. The yellow paint lay in an uneven zig-zag up its forehead, making the cranium appear as if it were an egg about to birth the sun.

The ant backed away hurridly, trying to turn. Morgan caught it just at the wasp waist and squeezed, cutting the scout in half. In the close confines of the tunnel, it writhed, stroking surprise, agony and hatred on the walls, on Morgan's face.

Bending forward over the broken body, Morgan sunk his steel mandibles on either side of the paint and into its brain. The ant died in inert silence, the pebbled eyes wide, not with astonishment, but with an absolute lack of expression. The slender red legs twitched and then curled in the silent, insectile body language of death.

Morgan had to crawl over the corpse to go on.

A few more feet downwards, the tunnel branched. He caught the first whiff of excitement: the smell of busy ants carrying food to the heart of the nest. The trail was a few days old.

He hurried down the left hand corridor and, in only a few feet, came to another fork. The taste on the floor was newer. Emerging from that tunnel, he surprised an entire line of food gatherers marching back from the surface.

The first invicta by the gap turned to touch him. Morgan caught the yellow-streaked antenna in his jaws and snapped. The ant backed away in astonished pain, dropping its load of food.

Morgan shouldered his way out into the new tunnel. The ants, both blues and yellows, had skittered away a few inches to stand indecisively bottlenecked. The ones traveling away from Morgan dropped their food, doubled back and attacked.

A pair of serrated jaws clicked and slid off Morgan's metal shoulder. Legs thin as reeds fought for purchase on his slick back. He heard a tap-tap-tap on his underside as an invicta battered its stinger futilely against his belly.

He cut through them slowly, having to stop every inch and wipe his jaws clean, having to struggle for every bit of tunnel. They tried to shove him back, but he weighed more. Lower into the corridor he fought, three invictas clinging to his shoulders, a puree of dying ants behind him.

When he came to the next tunnel mouth, he crawled inside and dropped to his belly, exhausted. The invictas prowled around him for a while, touching, tasting. Finally, they went away.

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Morgan put a feeler up to his head. They'd branded him with scent. Murderer.

Since he wasn't moving, he wondered if Shirley would take off his helmet. She didn't. He lay on the cool floor of the tunnel and nearly went to sleep. A long while later, still exhausted, he rose and followed the alarmed trail of the workers downward.

A few yards down, the now-empty tunnel branched. Wearily, he swept his light over the dark entrance. Sight told him nothing. Taste did. The line of workers had split, too.

He took the entrance on his left. It turned and dipped, righted itself, and then dipped precipitously again. At the bottom of the long hill, his headlights caught an oily glint.

Suspicious, he halted. Bang. Something hit him in the back and suddenly he was tumbling, the attacking invicta tumbling with him. He dug his legs into the side of the corridor, but momentum had hold. He rolled end-over-end until he hit the pool of honey at the bottom, the invicta under him.

The servo motors whined as he fought to free his legs from the ooze. There was a bright flash and a sizzle as the right foreleg burned out. He nearly collapsed on top of the ant.

That's when he noticed the invicta wasn't moving much. It didn't seem at all surprised. It wouldn't be, of course. As a Blue, it knew him. And it knew what he wanted. It had never hoped for escape.

Morgan struggled for a moment, then gave up in exhaustion. To his front, the invicta's hive brothers were sealing them both in the tunnel. Morgan could feel the feathery touch of the doomed invicta's legs against his waist, his shoulder.

Morgan's legs failed. He dropped over the fallen invicta, chest to chest, belly to belly. He put his head down slowly until his face touched that of the trapped ant. The huge eyes told him nothing. The antennae stroked gently down the side of Morgan's cheek, not saying much, either, really.

The ant didn't talk of hatred. He didn't even talk of fear. It seemed that the ant was speaking more to himself than he was to Morgan. He talked of the hive, and of queens tucked in, and of the brittle fragility of pupae.

Morgan didn't move. Cradled in Morgan's metal arms, the ant stroked him, and told of food sharing and the hatching of eggs in the dark.

Abrupt light made him blink. "You okay?" Novotny asked.

Morgan, mouth open, eyes slitted, didn't answer. He wondered where the gentle, dying ant was.

"Hey! Hey! Morgan! Rise and shine!" Novotny shoved his face into Morgan's.

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Morgan raised his hand and tenderly cupped Novotny's warm cheek.

The tech jerked away. "Shit!" he said, wiping the side of his face and glancing around nervously to see if anyone was laughing.

Nobody was.

"Get up," Shirley said. "Let's go take a walk down the hall."

Morgan's legs were unsteady. Shirley helped him.

"What the fuck's happening to you?" Shirley asked when they had closed the door behind them.

At the entrance to the locker room, Morgan paused and then went in. "Take a shower," he mumbled.

Shirley followed him. "You still think they talk to you, don't you?"

He tried to unbutton his shirt. His fingers wouldn't work.

"They're just *ants*, Steve."

For some reason, he was highly aware of her next to him. One second she hadn't been there, the next moment she was the only real thing in the room. He grabbed her and shoved her against the steel lockers. The impact was metallic, loud. He pressed his body against hers: belly to belly, chest to chest. He rubbed his head against her cheek. Her skin was a blank page.

"Get off me!" She shoved.

He stumbled away.

With brisk hands, she wiped the touch of him off her. Morgan wondered if he had left his scent markers behind: the scent of longing, the scent of regret.

"Tomorrow," she said. "Tomorrow you kill the Yellow queens, and then you take a vacation or something. Go skiing."

He shuddered as he imagined Colorado and its wide, dizzying, expanse of sky. "I don't ski."

She backed up. "Do *something*. Go *some*where. You're getting weird."

"I'm sorry," he whispered. Then he remembered he was probably staring, and looked quickly away.

After turning off the ten o'clock news, Donna fell asleep and left Morgan awake, his arm crooked over his forehead, his eyes open to the ceiling. The space between the slats in the mini-blinds had captured a stripe of grey light-blasted city sky and a single blue star.

After a while he pulled his pajama bottoms down, rolled her over and slid his body over hers. She made a protesting sound in the back of her throat. Her legs parted sleepily and he thrust himself partially in.

Then he lay there.

In the apartments around him, he imagined the moving of bodies. He could even hear their faint sounds: water running in a tub; footsteps on the ceiling. It made him feel safe.

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Then, in the dim glow from the streetlamp outside the window, he saw her eyes pop open. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Nothing." He caged her slender shoulders between his elbows.

She moved her hips. "Are you going to come, or what?"

Lowering his head to hers to smell, not to kiss, he freed his right arm and caressed her cheek. His thumb and forefinger spoke of death. He couldn't help that.

"I said, are you going to come?"

"I don't know."

She moved her hips again. He lost what little erection he had had. With a wet, limp plop, he fell out of her.

There was a flurry of movement under him. With hard fists and sharp nails, Donna fought her way out of bed. His chest was bruised. The scratches stung. She'd succeeded in hurting him, something the ants had never managed.

"Jesus Christ," Donna spat.

There was the slam of the bathroom door. The sound of the water running in his own shower. A little while later, she came out and got dressed. Her hair was wet.

In the light from the bathroom, she opened a drawer and began flinging things out into a shopping bag.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She didn't look up from her task. "Leaving."

Morgan reached down and pulled the sheet up to his chin.

"Listen," she said and paused. "There's somebody else. I've been seeing him for a while."

Morgan thought of another man with Donna. Infidelity. It seemed that the word should have had some meaning. Aimlessly, he rolled it around in his mind. "Don't leave."

"God. I don't believe this. You don't ask who. You don't even ask when."

It didn't matter. Lying back down on the pillow, he listened to the sharp, angry sounds of Donna's departure. "Please," he whispered.

There was a bang as a drawer was slammed closed. He looked down to see her bent in silent grief over the dresser. Underwear, hers and his, was scattered on the floor.

"I won't touch you again. Not ever. I promise. Just don't leave."

She shook her head slowly. Her eyes were closed. "We can't live like this."

Oh, yes, we can, he thought. The point wasn't touching, it wasn't making love. The point was having her enclosed in the dark apartment walls and knowing she was there. "You can sleep with him, okay? You can sleep with anybody. Please. Just don't leave me."

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She left anyway. When she was gone, Morgan rose and walked, disoriented, through the once safe chambers of the house.

After putting his helmet on, he went down the way he had gone before, past the dead pharaoh, past the battle chamber. He made an excursion down the long, winding tunnel to the honey and the last inoperative unit. Before the wall the invictas had hastily constructed, the last robot lay humped on the curled, still body of the ant.

Morgan reached out carefully and touched one of the invicta's dead legs. He would have saved the Blue if he could have; but when Novotny had pulled the helmet off him, the full, dumb weight of the robot had pressed down, shoving the ant under the ooze. It had quickly and peacefully drowned.

He turned and looked up the long tunnel, realizing at last what an opening he'd given the invictas. His nerves on edge, he crawled his difficult way up the loose gravel of the tunnel. Only when he was at the top of the incline did he relax.

There was one other corridor. He started down it. Surprisingly close to the entrance, he found the first of the queens' chambers.

There were hundreds of them.

The bodies of the huge females filled the far end of the room, their fecund scent making the atmosphere thick. Slowly, gracefully, as if she knew fate had arrived in the form of the smaller silvered body, the nearest queen turned her velvet eyes towards him.

He started forward, but something tugged at his arm. Looking around he saw the first worker he had seen all day.

The ant, a Yellow, dropped off him and started to sway. Morgan understood scent language. He'd never been around live ants long enough to learn the meanings of the dance.

He watched it. Backwards and forwards it went. Sideways, its antennae making patterns in the air. Behind the worker, a crowd of Blues and Yellows had gathered, all waiting.

At last the invicta stopped, its antennae weaving questions. Morgan came forward slowly. The ant froze.

Putting his metal antennae towards the translucent red ones, Morgan touched it.

My wife left me, he thought.

The invicta stroked him back, not understanding, but talking of hives, of queens, of satisfaction. Morgan knew what it was really saying, that it knew Morgan was invincible. The invicta couldn't stop him from killing for no reason; so it was giving him a reason not to kill.

To survive, the invicta had first learned not to wage war among them-

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selves. The queens had learned to share hives. And now they had finally learned the difficult lesson of how to live with others.

Morgan caressed the slick, blank face so carefully that the metal never made a sound against the chitinous armor.

If he could tell the ant anything, it would be that he understood the pain of dead queens, barren nests.

The ant's antennae fluttered, making scented, soft peace.

When Morgan maneuvered the robot to the exit where the recovery tools were waiting, Novotny took the control helmet off. "You didn't get the queens."

"No," he said. He stood up and wiped the tears from his eyes. The front of his shirt was wet with them.

"I saw everything," Shirley told him. "You didn't kill the queens!"

Morgan raised his voice. "I'll get them tomorrow, okay?"

He hurried out of the room towards the showers, Shirley tagging at his heels. "Goddamn it. I can see it in your face. You won't be back tomorrow."

"I'll be back."

She whipped out her hand, caught him by the arm and pulled him around. Her face was close, soft and pink. "You motherfucking liar."

He started to laugh.

Back at the apartment, he closed the shades and then walked into the twilight kitchen, running his hands along the microwave, the toaster. He didn't understand why Donna had left; he'd worked so hard to make the chamber right.

Unlike the Blues, there were no friendly Yellows to take Morgan in. He would stay in his abandoned nest until the food ran out.

On the shadowed surface of the formica, small dots milled happily around a spill of grease. Ants. He brought his face down closer to see them.

Pharaohs.

Somewhere in the dark, below the apartment foundation, were cool acidic tunnels with moist walls. There the bloated queens waited. And there, perhaps, the invictas would come with their deadly jaws, their bladders swollen with alkaloid poison.

If invicta came, they'd kill them all. They'd conquer the pharaoh's nest. As the invictas had recently learned, and the humans had learned centuries ago, that was the right of intelligence; the demand of civilization. A shudder started from the back of his brain and worked its way through his body.

He turned to the sink, ran water over a sponge, and took it to where

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the ants were gathered. Pushing each tiny body gently to the side, he wiped the grease spot away.

For a little while the pharaohs lingered, confused that the food was suddenly gone.

"My wife left me," he whispered, but the ants didn't understand. Pharaohs had never been very smart, had never learned the tricks of sleight-of-hand, of warfare, of diplomacy, of evolution. Finally, one by one, still apparently content, they wandered down the crack between the stove and the cabinet to home. ●

THE CEPHEID VARIABLE

There's a kind of star that beats like a slow heart;
creeping systole of days or weeks. Months, even,
lag between maximum and minimum, but precise
months—
an accurate clock as it bloats and contracts,
like a film running forward and back
like a heart attack waiting to happen.

These slow-beating hearts, these Cepheids,
come only one per million stars,
so maybe they're just rare. Or maybe
it's a short-term thing, this languid steady flux of light,
that all large stars survive,
like hot flashes at menopause;
like panic heartburn on a milestone birthday.

A few thousands or millions of pulses, then,
though one suffices, to dry up oceans,
to drive all a planet's air into space;
to roast it clean of life's contamination.
Then settle back into stasis
like a frozen clock stenciled on wallpaper;
like a murderer's heart in a jar.

—Joe Haldeman

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THE SAFE-DEPOSIT BOX

by Greg Egan

Greg Egan's most recent sales include stories to *Interzone* and *Pulphouse*, and he is currently at work on a new science fiction novel. "The Safe-Deposit Box" is his second story for *IAsfm*.

art: Peter Catalanotto

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I dream a simple dream. I dream that I have a name. One name, unchanging, mine until death. I don't know what my name *is,* but that doesn't matter. Knowing that I have it is enough.

I wake just before the alarm clock goes off (I usually do), so I'm able to reach out and silence it the instant it starts screeching. The woman beside me doesn't move; I hope the alarm wasn't meant for her, too. It's freezing cold and pitch black, except for the bedside clock's red digits slowly coming into focus. Ten to *four!* I groan softly. What am I? A garbage collector? A milkman? This body is sore and tired, but that tells me nothing; they've all been sore and tired lately, whatever their profession, their income, their lifestyle. Yesterday I was a diamond merchant. Not quite a millionaire, but close. The day before I was a bricklayer, and the day before that I sold menswear. Crawling out of a warm bed felt pretty much the same each time.

I find my hand traveling instinctively to the switch for the reading light on my side of the bed. When I click it on, the woman stirs and mumbles "Johnny?" but her eyes remain closed. I make my first conscious effort to access this host's memories; sometimes I can pick up a frequently used name. Linda? Could be. *Linda.* I mouth it silently, looking at the tangle of soft brown hair almost hiding her sleeping face.

The situation, if not the individual, is comfortingly familiar. *Man looks fondly upon sleeping wife.* I whisper to her, "I love you", and I mean it; I love, not this particular woman (with a past I'll barely glimpse, and a future that I have no way of sharing), but the composite woman of which, today, she is a part—my flickering, inconstant companion, my lover made up of a million pseudorandom words and gestures, held together only by the fact that I behold her, known in her entirety to no one but me.

In my romantic youth, I used to speculate: Surely I'm not the only one of my kind? Might there not be another like me, but who wakes each morning in the body of a woman? Might not whatever mysterious factors determine the selection of *my* host act in parallel on *her,* drawing us together, keeping us together day after day, transporting us, side by side, from host couple to host couple?

Not only is it unlikely, it simply isn't true. The last time (nearly twelve years ago now) that I cracked up and started spouting the unbelievable truth, my host's wife *did not* break in with shouts of relief and recognition, and her own, identical, confession. (She didn't do much at all, actually. I expected her to find my rantings frightening and traumatic, I expected her to conclude at once that I was dangerously insane. Instead, she listened briefly, apparently found what I was saying either boring or incomprehensible, and so, very sensibly, left me alone for the rest of the day.)

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Not only is it untrue, it simply doesn't matter. Yes, my lover has a thousand faces, and yes, a different soul looks out from every pair of eyes, but I can still find (or imagine) as many unifying patterns in my memories of her as any other man or woman can find (or imagine) in their own perceptions of their own most faithful lifelong companion.

Man looks fondly upon sleeping wife.

I climb out from under the blankets and stand for a moment, shivering, looking around the room, eager to start moving to keep myself warm, but unable to decide what to do first. Then I spot a wallet on top of a chest of drawers.

I'm John Francis O'Leary, according to the driver's license. Date of birth: November 15, 1951—which makes me one week older than when I went to bed. Although I still have occasional daydreams about waking up twenty years younger, that seems to be as unlikely for me as it is for anyone else; in thirty-nine years, so far as I know, I've yet to have a host born anytime but November or December of 1951. Nor have I ever had a host either born, or presently living, outside this city.

I don't know *how* I move from one host to the next, but since any process could be expected to have some finite effective range, my geographical confinement is not surprising. There's desert to the east, ocean to the west, and long stretches of barren coast to the north and south; the distances from town to town are simply too great for me to cross. In fact, I never even seem to get *close* to the outskirts of the city, and on reflection that's not surprising: if there are one hundred potential hosts to the west of me, and five to the east, then a jump to a randomly chosen host is *not* a jump in a random direction. The populous center attracts me with a kind of statistical gravity.

As for the restrictions on host age and birthplace, I've never had a theory plausible enough to believe for more than a day or two. It was easy when I was twelve or thirteen, and could pretend I was some kind of alien prince, imprisoned in the bodies of Earthlings by a wicked rival for my cosmic inheritance; the bad guys must have put something in the city's water, late in 1951, which was drunk by expectant mothers, thus preparing their unborn children to be my unwitting jailers. These days I accept the likelihood that I'll simply never know the answer.

I am sure of one thing, though: both restrictions were essential to whatever approximation to sanity I now possess. Had I "grown up" in bodies of completely random ages, or in hosts scattered world-wide, with a different language and culture to contend with every day, I doubt that I'd even *exist*—no personality could possibly emerge from such a cacophony of experiences. (Then again, an ordinary person might think the same of my own relatively stable, origins.)

I don't recall being John O'Leary before, which is unusual. This city

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contains only six thousand men aged thirty-nine, and of those, roughly one thousand would have been born in November or December. Since thirty-nine years is more than fourteen thousand days, the odds by now are heavily against first-timers, and I've visited most hosts several times within memory.

In my own inexpert way, I've explored the statistics a little. Any given potential host should have, on average, one thousand days, or three years, between my visits. Yet the average time I should expect to pass without repeating any hosts *myself* is a mere forty days (the average to date is actually lower, twenty-seven days, presumably because some hosts are more susceptible than others). When I first worked this out it seemed paradoxical, but only because the averages don't tell the whole story; a fraction of all repeat visits occur within weeks rather than years, and of course it's these abnormally fast ones that determine the rate for me.

In a safe-deposit box (with a combination lock) in the center of the city, I have records covering the past twenty-two years. Names, addresses, dates of birth, and dates of each visit since 1968, for over eight hundred hosts. One day soon, when I have a host who can spare the time, I really must rent a computer with a database package and shift all that crap onto disk; that would make statistical tests a thousand times easier. I don't expect astounding revelations; if I found some kind of bias or pattern in the data, well, so what? Would that tell me anything? Would that *change* anything? Still, it seems like a good thing to do.

Partly hidden under a pile of coins beside the wallet is—*oh, bliss!*—an ID badge, complete with photo. John O'Leary is an orderly at the Pearlman Psychiatric Institute. The photo shows part of a light blue uniform, and when I open his wardrobe there it is. I believe this body could do with a shower, though, so I postpone dressing.

The house is small and plainly furnished, but very clean and in good repair. I pass one room that is probably a child's bedroom, but the door is closed and I leave it that way, not wanting to risk waking anyone. In the living room, I look up the Pearlman Institute in the phone book, and then locate it in a street directory. I've already memorized my own address from the license, and the Institute's not far away; I work out a route that shouldn't take more than twenty minutes, at this hour of the morning. I still don't know when my shift starts; surely not before five.

Standing in the bathroom, shaving, I stare for a moment into my new brown eyes, and I can't help noticing that John O'Leary is not bad looking at all. It's a thought that leads nowhere. For a long while now, thankfully, I've managed to accept my fluctuating appearance with relative tranquility, though it hasn't always been that way. I had several neurotic patches, in my teens and early twenties, when my mood would swing violently between elation and depression, depending on how I felt about

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my latest body. Often, for weeks after departing an especially good looking host (which of course I'd have delayed for as long as possible, by staying awake night after night), I'd fantasize obsessively about returning, preferably to stay. At least an ordinary, screwed-up adolescent *knows* he has no choice but to accept the body in which he was born. I had no such comfort.

I'm more inclined now to worry about my health, but that's every bit as futile as fretting over appearance. There's no point whatsoever in me exercising, or watching my diet, since any such gesture is effectively diluted one-thousandfold. "My" weight, "my" fitness, "my" alcohol and tobacco consumption, can't be altered by my own personal initiative —they're public health statistics, requiring vastly expensive advertising campaigns to budge them even slightly.

After showering, I comb my hair in imitation of the ID photo, hoping that it's not too out of date.

Linda opens her eyes and stretches as I walk, naked, back into the bedroom, and the sight of her gives me an erection at once. I haven't had sex for months; almost every host lately seems to have managed to screw himself senseless the night *before* I arrived, and to have subsequently lost interest for the following fortnight. Apparently, my luck has changed. Linda reaches out and grabs me.

"I'll be late for work," I protest.

She turns and looks at the clock. "That's crap. You don't start until six. If you eat breakfast here, instead of detouring to that greasy truck stop, you won't have to leave for *an hour*."

Her fingernails are pleasantly sharp. I let her drag me toward the bed, then I lean over and whisper, "You know, that's *exactly* what I wanted to hear."

My earliest memory is of my mother reverently holding a bawling infant towards me, saying "Look, Chris! This is your baby brother. This is Paul! Isn't he beautiful?" I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. Siblings were like pets or toys; their number, their ages, their sexes, their names, all fluctuated as senselessly as the furniture or the wallpaper.

Parents were clearly superior; they changed appearance and behavior, but at least their names stayed the same. I naturally assumed that when I grew up, my name would become "Daddy," a suggestion that was usually greeted with laughter and amused agreement. I suppose I thought of my parents as being basically like me; their transformations were more extreme than my own, but everything else about them was bigger, so that made perfect sense. That they were in a sense *the same* from day to day, I never doubted; my mother and father were, by definition, the

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two adults who did certain things: scolded me, hugged me, tucked me into bed, made me eat disgusting vegetables, and so on. They stood out a mile, you couldn't miss them. Occasionally one or the other was absent, but never for more than a day.

The past and the future weren't problems; I simply grew up with rather vague notions as to what they actually *were*. "Yesterday" and "tomorrow" were like "once upon a time"—I was never disappointed by broken promises of future treats, or baffled by descriptions of alleged past events, because I treated all such talk as intentional fiction. I was often accused of telling "lies," and I assumed that was just a label applied to stories that were insufficiently interesting. Memories of events more than one day old were clearly worthless "lies," so I did my best to forget them.

I'm sure I was happy. The world was a kaleidoscope. I had a new house to explore every day, different toys, different playmates, different food. Sometimes the color of my skin would change (and it thrilled me to see that my parents, brothers, and sisters almost always chose to make their own skin the same as mine). Now and then I woke up as a girl, but at some point (around the age of four, I think) this began to trouble me, and soon after that, it simply stopped happening.

I had no suspicion that I was *moving*, from house to house, from body to body. I changed, my house changed, the other houses and the streets and shops and parks around me changed. I traveled now and then to the city center with my parents, but I thought of it not as a fixed location (since it was reached by a different route each time) but as a fixed feature of the world, like the sun or the sky.

School was the start of a long period of confusion and misery. Although the school building, the classroom, the teacher, and the other children changed like everything else in my environment, the repertoire was clearly not as wide as that of my house and family. Traveling to the same school, but along different streets, and with a different name and face, upset me, and the gradual realization that classmates were copying my own previous names and faces—and, worse still, I was being saddled with ones *they'd* used—was infuriating.

These days, having lived with the approved world view for so long, I sometimes find it hard to understand how my first year at school wasn't enough to make everything perfectly clear—until I recall that my glimpses of each classroom were generally spaced weeks apart, and that I was shuttling back and forth at random between more than a hundred schools. I had no diary, no records, no class lists in my head, no means of even *thinking about* what was happening to me—nobody had trained me in the scientific method. Even Einstein was a great deal older than six, when he worked out *his* theory of relativity.

I kept my disquiet from my parents, but I was sick of dismissing my

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memories as lies; I tried discussing them with other children, which brought ridicule and hostility. After a period of fights and tantrums, I grew introverted. My parents said things like, "You're quiet today!" day after day, proving to me exactly how stupid they were.

It's a miracle that I learned anything. Even now, I'm unsure how much of my reading ability belongs to me, and how much comes from my hosts. I'm sure that my vocabulary travels with me, but the lower-level business of scanning the page, of actually recognizing letters and words, feels quite different from day to day. (Driving is similar; almost all of my hosts have licenses, but I've never had a single lesson myself. I know the traffic rules, I know the gears and pedals, but I've never tried going out onto the road in a body that hasn't done it before—it would make a nice experiment, but those bodies tend not to own cars.)

I learned to read. I learned quickly to read quickly—if I didn't finish a book the day I started it, I knew I might not get my hands on it again for weeks, or months. I read hundreds of adventure stories, full of heroes and heroines with friends, brothers and sisters, even pets, that stayed with them day after day. Each book hurt a little more, but I couldn't stop reading, I couldn't give up hoping that the next book I opened would start with the words, "One sunny morning a boy woke up, and wondered what his name was."

One day I saw my father consulting a street directory, and, despite my shyness, I asked him what it was. I'd seen world globes and maps of the country at school, but never anything like this. He pointed out our house, my school, and his place of work, both on the detailed street maps, and on the key map of the whole city inside the front cover.

At that time, one brand of street directory had a virtual monopoly. Every family owned one, and every day for weeks, I browbeat my father or mother into showing me things on the key map. I successfully committed a lot of it to memory (once I tried making pencil marks, thinking they might somehow inherit the magical permanence of the directory itself, but they proved to be as transitory as all the writing and drawing I did at school). I knew I was onto something profound, but the concept of my own motion, from place to place in an unchanging city, still failed to crystallize.

Not long afterward, when my name was Danny Foster (a movie projectionist, these days, with a beautiful wife called Kate to whom I lost my virginity, though probably not Danny's), I went to a friend's eighth birthday party. I didn't understand birthdays at all; some years I had none, some years I had two or three. The birthday boy, Charlie McBride, was no friend of mine so far as I was concerned, but my parents bought me a gift to take, a plastic toy machine gun, and drove me to his house; I had no say in any of it. When I arrived home, I pestered Dad into

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showing me, on a street map, exactly where I'd been, and the route the car had taken.

A week later, I woke up with Charlie McBride's face, plus a house, parents, little brother, older sister, and toys, all identical to those I'd seen at his party. I refused to eat breakfast until my mother showed me our house on a street map, but I already knew where she'd point to.

I pretended to set off for school. My brother was too young for school, and my sister too old to want to be seen with me; in such circumstances I normally followed the clear flow of other children through the streets, but today I ignored it.

I still remembered landmarks from the trip to the party. I got lost a few times, but I kept stumbling upon streets I'd seen before; dozens of fragments of my world were starting to connect. It was both exhilarating and terrifying; I thought I was uncovering a vast conspiracy, I thought everyone had been purposefully concealing the secrets of existence, and at last I was on the verge of outsmarting them all.

When I reached Danny's house, though, I didn't feel triumphant, I simply felt lonely and deceived and confused. Revelation or no revelation, I was still a child. I sat on the front steps and cried. Mrs. Foster came out, in a fluster, calling me Charlie, asking me where my mother was, how I'd got here, why I wasn't at school. I yelled abuse at this filthy *liar,* who'd pretended, like they all had, to be my mother. Phone calls were made, and I was driven home screaming, to spend the day in my bedroom, refusing to eat, refusing to speak, refusing to explain my unforgivable behavior.

That night, I overheard my "parents" discussing me, arranging what in retrospect I now believe was a visit to a child psychologist.

I never made it to that appointment.

For the past eleven years now, I've been spending my days at the host's workplace. It's certainly not for the host's sake; I'm far more likely to get him fired for screwing up at his job than by causing him one day's absence every three years. It's, well, it's what I do, it's who I am these days. Everybody has to define themselves somehow; I am a professional impersonator. The pay and conditions are variable, but a vocation cannot be denied.

I've tried constructing an independent life for myself, but I've never been able to make it work. When I was much younger, and mostly unmarried, I'd set myself things to study. That's when I first hired the safe-deposit box to keep notes in. I studied mathematics, chemistry, and physics, in the city's central library, but when any subject began to grow difficult, it was hard to find the discipline to push myself onwards. What was the point? I knew I could never be a practicing scientist. As for

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uncovering the nature of my plight, it was clear that the answer was not going to lie in any library book on neurobiology. In the cool, quiet reading rooms, with nothing to listen to but the soporific drone of the air conditioning, I'd lapse into daydreams as soon as the words or equations in front of me stopped making easy sense.

I once did a correspondence course in undergraduate level physics; I hired a post office box, and kept the key to it in my safe-deposit box. I completed the course, and did quite well, but I had no one to tell of my achievement.

A while after that I got a pen pal in Switzerland. She was a music student, a violinist, and I told her I was studying physics at the local university. She sent me a photo, and, eventually, I did the same, after waiting for one of my best-looking hosts. We exchanged letters regularly, every week for more than a year. One day she wrote, saying she was coming to visit, asking for details of how we could meet. I don't think I'd ever felt as lonely as I did then. If I hadn't sent that photo, I could at least have seen her for one day. I could have spent a whole afternoon, talking face to face with my only true friend, the only person in the world who actually knew, not one of my hosts, but *me*. I stopped writing at once, and I gave up renting the post office box.

I've contemplated suicide at times, but the fact that it would be certain murder, and perhaps do nothing to me but drive me into another host, makes an effective deterrent.

Since leaving behind all the turmoil and bitterness of my childhood, I've generally tried to be fair to my hosts. Some days I've lost control and done things that must have inconvenienced or embarrassed them (and I take a little cash for my safe-deposit box from those who can easily spare it), but I've never set out to intentionally harm anyone. Sometimes I almost feel that they know about me and wish me well, although all the indirect evidence, from questioning wives and friends when I've had closely spaced visits, suggests that the missing days are hidden by seamless amnesia—my hosts don't even know that they've been out of action, let alone have a chance of guessing why. As for *me* knowing *them*, well, I sometimes see love and respect in the eyes of their families and colleagues, I sometimes see physical evidence of achievements I can admire—one host has written a novel, a black comedy about his Vietnam experiences, that I've read and enjoyed; one is an amateur telescope maker with a beautifully crafted, thirty-centimeter Newtonian reflector, through which I viewed Halley's comet—but there are *too many of them*. By the time I die, I'll have glimpsed each of their lives for just twenty or thirty randomly scattered days.

I drive around the perimeter of the Pearlman Institute, seeing what

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windows are lit, what doors are open, what activity is visible. There are several entrances, ranging from one clearly for the public, complete with plushly carpeted foyer and polished mahogany reception desk, to a rusty metal swing-door opening onto a dingy bitumen-covered space between two buildings. I park in the street, rather than risk taking a spot on the premises to which I'm not entitled.

I'm nervous as I approach what I hope is the correct doorway; I still get a pain in my gut in those awful seconds just before I'm first seen by a colleague, and it becomes, very suddenly, a hundred times harder to back out—and, looking on the bright side, a whole lot easier to continue.

"Morning Johnny."

"Morning."

The nurse continues past me even as this brief exchange takes place. I'm hoping to find out where I'm meant to be from a kind of social binding strength; the people I spend most time with ought to greet me with more than a nod and two words. I wander a short way along a corridor, trying to get used to the squeaking of my rubber-soled shoes on the linoleum. Suddenly, a gruff voice cries out, "O'Leary!" and I turn to see a young man in a uniform like mine, striding along the corridor towards me, wearing a thunderous frown, arms stuck out unnaturally, face twitching. "Standing around! Dawdling! *Again!*" His behavior is so bizarre that, for a fraction of a second, I'm convinced he's one of the patients; some psychotic with a grudge against me has killed another orderly, stolen his uniform, and is about to produce a blood-stained hatchet. Then the man puffs out his cheeks and stands there glaring, and I suddenly twig; he's not insane, he's just parodying some obese, aggressive superior. I prod his inflated face with one finger, as if bursting a balloon, which gives me a chance to get close enough to read his badge: Ralph Dopita.

"You jumped a *mile!* I couldn't believe it! So at last I got the voice *perfect!*"

"And the face as well. But you're lucky, you were born ugly."

He shrugs. "Your wife didn't think so last night."

"You were drunk; that wasn't my wife, it was your mother."

"Don't I always say you're like a father to me?"

The corridor, after much seemingly gratuitous winding, leads into a kitchen, all stainless steel and steam, where two other orderlies are standing around, and three cooks are preparing breakfast. With hot water constantly running in one sink, the clunking of trays and utensils, the hissing of fat, and the tortured sound of a failing ventilation fan, it's almost impossible to hear anyone speak. One of the orderlies mimes being a chicken, and then makes a gesture—swinging one hand above his head, pointing outward, as if to take in the whole building. "Enough

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eggs to feed—" he shouts, and the others crack up, so I laugh along with them.

Later, I follow them to a storeroom off the kitchen, where each of us grabs a trolley. Pinned up on a board, sheathed in transparent plastic, are four patient lists, one for each ward, ordered by room number. Beside each name is a little colored circular sticker, green, red, or blue. I hang back until there's only one left to grab.

There are three kinds of meal prepared: bacon and eggs with toast, cereal, and a mushy yellow puree resembling baby food, in descending order of popularity. On my own list there are more red stickers than green, and only a single blue, but I'm fairly certain that there were more green than red in total, when I saw all four lists together. As I load my trolley on this basis, I manage to catch a second look at Ralph's list, which is mainly green, and the contents of his trolley confirms that I have the code right.

I've never been in a psychiatric hospital before, either as patient or staff member. I spent a day in prison about five years ago, where I narrowly avoided getting my host's skull cracked in; I never discovered what he'd done, or how long his sentence was, but I'm rather hoping he'll be out by the time I get back to him.

My vague expectation that this place will be similar turns out to be pleasantly wrong. The prison cells were personalized to some degree, with pictures on the walls, and idiosyncratic possessions, but they still looked like cells. The rooms here are far less cluttered with that kind of thing, but their underlying character is a thousand times less harsh. There are no bars on the windows, and the doors in my ward have no locks. Most patients are already awake, sitting up in bed, greeting me with a quiet "Good morning"; a few take their trays into a common room, where there's a TV tuned to news. Perhaps the degree of calm is unnatural, due solely to drugs; perhaps the peacefulness that makes my job untraumatic is stultifying and oppressive to the patients. Perhaps not. Maybe one day I'll find out.

My last patient, the single blue sticker, is listed as Klein, F. C. A skinny, middle-aged man with untidy black hair and a few days' stubble. He's lying so straight that I expect to see straps holding him in place, but there are none. His eyes are open but they don't follow me, and when I greet him there's no response.

There's a bedpan on a table beside the bed, and on a hunch I sit him up and arrange it beneath him; he's easily manipulated, not exactly cooperating, but not dead weight either. He uses the bedpan impassively. I find some paper and wipe him, then I take the bedpan to the toilets, empty it, and wash my hands thoroughly. I'm feeling only slightly queasy; O'Leary's inurement to tasks like this is probably helping.

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Klein sits with a fixed gaze as I hold a spoonful of yellow mush in front of him, but when I touch it to his lips he opens his mouth wide. He doesn't close his mouth on the spoon, so I have to turn it and tip the food off, but he does swallow the stuff, and only a little ends up on his chin.

A woman in a white coat pops her head into the room and says, "Could you shave Mr. Klein, please, Johnny, he's going to St. Margaret's for some tests this morning," and then vanishes before I can reply.

After taking the trolley back to the kitchen, collecting empty trays along the way, I find all I need in the storeroom. I move Klein onto a chair—again he seems to make it easy, without quite assisting. He stays perfectly still as I lather and shave him, except for an occasional blink. I manage to nick him only once, and not deeply.

The same woman returns, this time carrying a thick manila folder and a clipboard, and she stands beside me. I get a peek at her badge—Dr. Helen Lidcombe.

"How's it going, Johnny?"

"Okay."

She hovers expectantly, and I feel suddenly uneasy. I must be doing something wrong. Or maybe I'm just too slow. "Nearly finished," I mutter. She reaches out with one hand and absent-mindedly massages the back of my neck. *Walking on eggs time.* Why can't my hosts lead uncomplicated lives? Sometimes I feel like I'm living the out-takes from a thousand soap operas. What does John O'Leary have a right to expect of me? To determine the precise nature and extent of this relationship, and leave him neither more nor less involved tomorrow than he was yesterday? Some chance.

"You're very tense."

I need a safe topic, quickly. *The patient.*

"This guy, I don't know, some days, he just gets to me."

"What, is he behaving differently?"

"No, no, I just wonder. What it must be like for him."

"Like nothing much."

I shrug. "He knows when he's sitting on a bedpan. He knows when he's being fed. He's not a vegetable."

"It's hard to say what he 'knows.' A leech with a couple of neurons 'knows' when to suck blood. All things considered, he does remarkably well, but I don't think he has anything like consciousness, or even anything like dreams." She gives a little laugh. "All he has is memories, though memories of *what* I can't imagine."

I start wiping off the shaving soap. "How do you know he has memories?"

"I'm exaggerating." She reaches into the folder and pulls out a photographic transparency. It looks like a side-on head X-ray, but blobs and

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bands of artificial color adorn it. "Last month I finally got the money to do a few PET scans. There are things going on in Mr. Klein's hippocampus that look suspiciously like long-term memories being laid down." She whips the transparency back in the folder before I've had a chance for a proper look. "But comparing anything in *his* head with studies on normals is like comparing the weather on Mars with the weather on Jupiter."

I'm growing curious, so I take a risk, and ask with a furrowed brow, "Did you ever tell me exactly how he ended up like this?"

She rolls her eyes. "Don't start with that again! You know I'd get in trouble."

"Who do you think I'd blab to?" I copy Ralph Dopita's imitation for a second, and Helen bursts out laughing. "Hardly. You haven't said more than three words to *him* since you've been here: *'Sorry Dr. Pearlman.'* "

"So why don't you tell me?"

"If you told your friends—"

"Do you think I tell my friends everything? Is that what you think? Don't you trust me at all?"

She sits on Klein's bed. "Close the door." I do it.

"His father was a pioneering neurosurgeon."

"What?"

"If you say a *word*—"

"I won't, I promise. But what did he do? *Why?"*

"His primary research interest was redundancy and functional cross-over; the extent to which people with lost or damaged portions of the brain manage to transfer the functions of the impaired regions into healthy tissue.

"His wife died giving birth to a son, their only child. He must have been psychotic already, but *that* put him right off the planet. He blamed the child for his wife's death, but he was too cold-blooded to do something simple like kill it."

I'm about ready to tell her to shut up, that I really *do not* wish to know any more, but John O'Leary is a big, tough man with a strong stomach, and I mustn't disgrace him in front of his lover.

"He raised the child 'normally,' talking to it, playing with it, and so on, and making extensive notes on how it was developing; vision, coordination, the rudiments of speech, you name it. When it was a few months old, he implanted a network of cannuli, a web of very fine tubes, spanning almost the entire brain, but narrow enough not to cause any problems themselves. And then he kept on as before, stimulating the child, and recording its progress. And every week, via the cannuli, he destroyed a little more of its brain."

I let out a long string of obscenities. Klein, of course, just sits there,

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but suddenly I'm ashamed of violating his privacy, however meaningless that concept might be in his case. My face is flushed with blood, I feel slightly dizzy, slightly less than real. "How come he even survived? How come there's *anything* left at all?"

"The extent of his father's insanity saved him, if that's the word to use. You see, for months during which he was regularly losing brain tissue, the child actually continued to develop neurologically—more slowly than normal, of course, but moving perceptibly forward nonetheless. Professor Klein was too much the scientist to bury a result like that; he *wrote up* all his observations and tried to get them published. The journal thought it was some kind of sick hoax, but they told the police, who eventually got around to investigating. But by the time the child was rescued, well—" She nods towards the impassive Klein.

"How much of his brain is left? Isn't there a chance—?"

"Less than ten percent. There are cases of microcephalics who live almost normal lives with a similar brain mass, but being born that way, having gone through fetal brain development that way, isn't a comparable situation. There was a young girl a few years ago, who had a hemispherectomy to cure severe epilepsy, and emerged from it with very little impairment, but she'd had years for her brain to gradually switch functions out of the damaged hemisphere. She was extremely lucky; in most cases that operation has been utterly disastrous. As for Mr. Klein, well, I'd say he wasn't lucky at all."

I seem to spend most of the rest of the morning mopping corridors. When an ambulance arrives to take Klein away for his tests, I feel mildly offended that no one asks for my assistance; the two ambulancemen, watched by Helen, plonk him into a wheelchair and wheel him away, like couriers collecting a heavy parcel. But I have even less right than John O'Leary to feel possessive or protective about "my" patients, so I push Klein out of my thoughts.

I eat lunch with the other orderlies in the staff room. We play cards, and make jokes that even I find stale by now, but I enjoy the company nonetheless. I am teasingly accused several times of having lingering "east coast tendencies," which makes sense; if O'Leary lived over east for a while, that would explain why I don't remember him. The afternoon passes slowly, but sleepily. Dr. Pearlman has flown somewhere, suddenly, to do whatever eminent psychiatrists or neurologists (I'm not even sure which he is) are called to do with great urgency in faraway cities—and this seems to let everyone, the patients included, relax. When my shift ends at three o'clock, and I walk out of the building saying "See you tomorrow" to everyone I pass, I feel (as usual) a certain sense of loss. It will pass.

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Because it's Friday, I detour to the city center to update the records in my safe-deposit box. In the pre-rush traffic I begin to feel mild elation, as all the minor tribulations of coping with the Pearlman Psychiatric Institute recede, banished for months, or years, or maybe even decades.

After making diary entries for the week, and adding a new page headed JOHN FRANCIS O'LEARY to my thick ring binder full of host details, the itch to *do something* with all this information grows in me, as it does now and then. But what? The prospect of renting a computer and arranging a place to use it is too daunting on a sleepy Friday afternoon. I could update, with the help of a calculator, my average host-repeat rate. That would be pretty bloody thrilling.

Then I recall the PET scan that Helen Lidcombe waved in front of me. Although I don't know a thing about interpreting such pictures myself, I can imagine how exciting it must be for a trained specialist to actually *see* brain processes displayed that way. If I could turn all *my* hundreds of pages of data into one colored picture—well, it might not tell me a damn thing, but the prospect is somehow infinitely more attractive than messing about to produce a few statistics that don't tell me a damn thing either.

I buy a street directory, the brand I am familiar with from childhood, with the key map inside the front cover. I buy a packet of five felt-tipped pens. I sit on a bench in a shopping arcade, covering the map with colored dots; a red dot for a host who's had from one to three visits, an orange dot for a host who's had four to six, and so on. It takes me an hour to complete, and when I'm finished the result does *not* look like a glossy, computer-generated brain scan at all. It looks like a mess.

And yet. Although the colors don't form isolated bands, and intermingle extensively, there's a definite concentration of blue in the city's northeast. As soon as I see this, it rings true; the northeast *is* more familiar to me than anywhere else. And a geographical bias would explain the fact that I repeat hosts more frequently than I ought to. For each color, I sketch a shaky pencil line that joins up all of its outermost points, and then another for all its innermost points. None of these lines intersects another. It's no perfect set of concentric circles by any means, but each curve is roughly centered on that patch of blue in the northeast. A region which contains, amongst many other things, the Pearlman Psychiatric Institute.

I pack everything back into the safe-deposit box. I need to give this a lot more thought. Driving home, a very vague hypothesis begins to form, but the traffic fumes, the noise, the glare of the setting sun, all make it hard to pin the idea down.

Linda is furious. "Where have you been? Our daughter had to call me, in tears, from a public phone booth, with money borrowed from a *complete*

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stranger, and *I* had to pretend to be sick and leave work and drive halfway across town to pick her up. Where the hell have you been?"

"I, I got caught up, with Ralph, he was celebrating—"

"I *called* Ralph. You weren't with Ralph."

I stand there in silence. She stares at me for a full minute, then turns and stomps away.

I apologize to Laura (I see the name on her school books), who is no longer crying but looks like she has been for hours. She is eight years old, and adorable, and I feel like dirt. I offer to help with her homework, but she assures me she doesn't need *anything at all* from me, so I leave her in peace.

Linda, not surprisingly, barely says a word to me for the rest of the evening. Tomorrow this problem will be John O'Leary's, not mine, which makes me feel twice as bad about it. We watch TV in silence. When she goes to bed, I wait an hour before following her, and if she isn't asleep when I climb in, she's doing a good imitation.

I lie in the dark with my eyes open, thinking about Klein and his long-term memories, his father's unspeakable "experiment," my brain scan of the city.

I never asked Helen how old Klein was, and now it's too late for that, but there'll surely be something in the newspapers from the time of his father's trial. First thing tomorrow—screw my host's obligations—I'll go to the central library and check that out.

Whatever consciousness is, it must be resourceful, it must be resilient. Surviving for so long in that tiny child, pushed into ever smaller corners of his mutilated, shrinking brain. But when the number of living neurons fell so low that no resourcefulness, no ingenuity, could make them suffice, what then? Did consciousness vanish in an instant? Did it slowly fade away, as function after function was discarded, until nothing remained but a few reflexes, and a parody of human dignity? Or did it—*how could it?*—reach out in desperation to the brains of a thousand other children, those young enough, flexible enough, to donate a fraction of their own capacity to save this one child from oblivion? Each one donating one day in a thousand from their own lives, to rescue me from that ruined shell, fit now for nothing but eating, defecating, and storing my long-term memories?

Klein, F. C. I don't even know what the initials stand for. Linda mumbles something and turns over. I feel remarkably unperturbed by my speculations, perhaps because I don't honestly believe that this wild theory could possibly be true. And yet, is it so much stranger than the mere fact of my existence?

And if I did believe it, how should I feel? Horrified by my own father's

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atrocities towards me? Yes. Astonished by such a miracle of human tenacity? Certainly.

I finally manage to cry—for Klein, F. C., or for myself, I don't know. Linda doesn't wake, but moved by some dream or instinct, she turns to me and holds me. Eventually I stop shaking, and the warmth of her body flows into me, peace itself.

As I feel sleep approaching, I make a resolution: From tomorrow, I start anew. From tomorrow, an end to mimicking my hosts. From tomorrow, whatever the problems, whatever the setbacks, I'm going to carve out a life of my own.

I dream a simple dream. I dream that I have a name. One name, unchanging, mine until death. I don't know what my name *is,* but that doesn't matter. Knowing that I have it is enough. ●

Binary Star

My mother outside her mobile home
tracks heaven through the lenses
of World War II binoculars.

Sometimes I join her
while the neighbor's curtains
toss suspicious winds in the cool night air.
Yes, we are a strange pair
speaking in tongues of a binary star
sharing dwindling fuel
yet alone as only two beings can be:
in themselves,
  alien.

We speak of Others long gone
their comet trails burning stubborn streaks
in the mind's eye
and of why planets broken
might in a state of dissipation
form rings.

We sweep our thoughts like cosmic dust,
the mass of which outweighs
the need for words.

—K. C. Warren

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BLUNDERBORE

by Esther M. Friesner

author has a number of fantasy novels
print—the most recent of which is
Hooray for Hellywood (Ace).
At present she's working on a
new trilogy for Ace that will
include *Broadway Banshee*,
Harpy High, and *Ragnarok*
and Roll, and she
also writing her
third SF novel.

George Thompson

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"Jack? *That* pipsqueak? What do you *think* I did with the spunkless little blowhard?" Another dart flew from the huge hand, landed with surprising accuracy dead center on the distant target. A long gob of spittle, no less precisely aimed, whizzed from between massive teeth gappy and yellow enough to pass for a jaundiced Stonehenge.

The lady shuddered as the giant's expectoration splatted *perfecto* right between her well-shined shoes. Not a driblet landed on their newly Vaselined black patent leather, but sometimes the *thought* is more than enough.

"I can't for the life of me imagine," she managed to reply. As a feeble jest she suggested, "Ground his bones to make your bread?"

The giant roared, a sound that might have been laughter or a bout with sinusitis. His nose was humped and sickled, red with many draughts of Guinness and lousy with pock-marks. Black hairs bristled angrily from the nostrils, hinting at hibernating porcupines.

"Grind his bones to make my bread? *There's* a good 'un!" He reached for another dart. The barkeep made haste to assure his client of a constant supply. "How'd the weensy manling live to juggle all them cowpats about killing me if I'd done *that,* eh?" The giant's lips pursed, the lower resembling a saddle of mutton, the upper two hams. "Oversight, that. I never thought he'd want it noised 'round how I used him. Writing it all up, though, telling it twisty, making out as he'd done for *me*— Well, I learned much of men from that, I did. Grind his bones. . . ." He grinned. "Not his bones. 'Tis nut bread I fancy."

The barkeep refilled the giant's mug and leaned across the counter to inquire softly, deferentially of the lady whether she would like another Bombay gin? She shook her head. Her lips were dry, her throat drier. The proper business suit that was her chrysalis of choice remained pressed, immaculate, entire, unsplit, though this was Saturday night and by rights she should be swinging by nyloned knees from the ceiling fixtures along about this hour.

The giant drained his measure and launched his dart. It split the first, just like Robin Hood's arrow always splintered those arrogant shafts of his unworthy rivals if they dared hog the bullseye before he shot. The legendary arrows were wood; the actual darts were steel. The metal let out a high, terrified shriek as it was so cavalierly violated from feathered wazoo to razored tip.

"But enough about me," said the giant. He shifted his weight on the bar. No stool would hold him, and he wasn't about to stand after a hard day's labor. The wood complained much, but only buckled a little. Bare feet with toes like hairy pattypan squashes swung back and forth, drumming the mahogany. "How'd a nice girl like *you* come to run a personal ad, then?"

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The lady took a deep breath. Her left hand began to wrench at the rings on her right. "It was my roommate's idea," she began. The rush of red murder she sent bubbling over a vision of her roommate's face left her giddy. How could she speak coherently when every second sentence to come to mind was *the bitch dies?*

Carthago delenda esse.

Two hours ago she had been afflicted merely with the usual crawful of first-meeting jitters, the nausea and palpitations often prequel to lucky at love. Then the giant walked in. He knew her at once (his telephone voice gave no warning, its quaint accent, seductive pitch and timbre conspiring only to make her silly with lust, inspiring her to heights of self-descriptive facility that left her thoroughly, instantly identifiable among thousands). She could not evade him by pretending to be someone else, or via the more practical shrieks of the bar's other patrons as they fled wildly out of the place beneath the fuzzy arbors of his armpits.

She had tried, though. He caught her.

Trapped, she had spent the time since in imagining all the most agonizing, crippling, humiliating ways one might dispose of a roommate who gave bad advice and did not clean the kitchen sufficiently well to make up for it. She supposed she might turn her over to the giant. There *was* that. First, however, present survival.

"You see," she went on, "I've been involved with someone for a very long time. His name's Ian. We had a—an understanding. A completely open twoness based on mutual respect and noninterference. But he needed personal space, room for growth, emotional evolution."

"Oh, ar?" the giant commented politely.

She sighed. "Well, he's gone now, you see. To find himself. And I have to get on with maximizing my own life experience. That's why the ad. It's rather hard to go back to ordinary dating when a long-term relationship ends, don't you agree?"

The giant's brows slipped down into the trenches of his forehead. "Bashed his skull in, did they?" he asked.

"?" she answered. It was really the best she could do, and not too paltry, under the circumstances.

"Trolls. Else renegado knights. One tump of the mace upside your goodman's temple-bone, and you're left to dance the widow's bransle. Too bad, too bad. Likely they raped you after, it's only their way, but still—" His eyebrows now slumped back like eels amorously exhausted. "Did hope as you'd be a virgin. I likes virgins."

"Will you excuse me?" she said, slipping gracefully from the barstool. "I have to go powder my nose." As an out it was retro, and sexist, and shameful in the extreme, but all she asked was that it save her skin long

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enough for her to get some use out of her thirty-five session contract at the Tropitan Salon.

In the ladies' room was a stall, and in the stall was a toilet, and over the toilet was a window, and *out* the window she did go, as fast as ever she could slink. There were runs in her Dior pantyhose and wrinkles in her Anne Klein linen suit, raw scrapes striping the sides of her Maud Frizon patent heels (one of which landed in the toilet) and four scales gouged out of her genuine alligator belt, but she emerged alive enough to pitch headfirst into the alley outside. In the alley was a dumpster, and in the dumpster were a lot of empty liquor cartons and dud lottery tickets and some really ripe muddled fruit-leavings. This she added to her roommate's account of payments due as she huddled in the taxi, plucked lemon rinds from her hair, and cursed all the way home.

And cursed louder, with renewed gusto, when her roommate told her that *she* didn't have to sit there and listen to *this* crap. *She* hadn't told her to stick the fateful ad in the New York *Review*. *She* thought the *Village Voice* was quite good enough, thank you, and just see where pretensions can leave you, stuck in some downtown bar with a creature out of myth and Jungian archetype whose toenails want cleaning.

The roommate quit. She packed. She left and moved in with her boyfriend who played the saxophone and really *understood* the *ausgleibnicht Kunstfertseichnet* of Michael J. Fox movies.

The lady was left with vengeance placed on Hold eternal, and a full month's New York rent to pay in heart's blood.

There was also a message on her answering machine. It was from *him*. Why not?

She changed her telephone number. She changed the locks on her doors. She acquired a new roommate by means of utmost discretion. She made a serious commitment to oat bran and never, never more used the weather or the time of the month as excuses for neglecting her morning jog. She became a whole person, relentless mistress of a whole mind in a whole body. Giants never happened to holistic people. Could be it was attributable to all that fiber. Her wholeness was astonishingly complete, given the strain a middle-management position could put on one's full immersion in the universe. Nothing daunted, she immersed.

He was waiting for her one Friday evening as she came out of her office building on Third Avenue. The air smelled of April and perambulating hot dog wagons. He brought flowers and a dead sheep.

"Sorry I was I got too personal with asking you things," he said, tendering her the bouquet. She took it gingerly, only because if you counted the attaché case clutched tightly in her other hand, it left her no possibility of accepting the sheep.

Apparently he saw it that way, too, for he disposed of the beastie

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casually, in three bites, head first, fleece and all, just as if it were an afterthought instead of over a hundred pounds of mutton. Wiping lanolin from his chin, he said, "Find it in your heart, could you, to let me buy you a drink, and no hard feelings?"

What could she do? See if he'd take "Just Say No" for an answer? A poor gamble. Run away? Not with the lights and rush hour traffic against her. Scream for help? Her supervisor might be watching. He was everywhere, paranoia justified, like a February flu. He was always looking for excuses to shunt her career into corporate sandpits.

She smiled at the giant. "Why not?" she said. If only to discover how he'd found her. Magic? Sorcery? God's vengeance on her (so Mama would maintain) for the Pill?

No magic was at work, beyond the ordinary levels present in the city, nor any intervention even marginally divine. He reminded her that she herself had told him where she worked when first they'd spoken over the phone. It was a beginner's mistake. Give nothing away. She sipped her drink (*this* bar, too, had turned into a wasteland when they entered) and asked him to pass the bran-nuts.

When guided off the subject of giant-killers, he turned out to be a pleasant enough companion, or at any rate no worse than her mother's idea of a good catch. She wasn't getting any younger, *ipse dixit* Mama. Well, neither was *he*. Three hundred years old, and then some sum he chose not to mention. He had never felt better in his life. He ate right. He took responsibility for his place in the ecoverse. The American climate agreed with him. He loved New York.

She had had worse Friday evenings.

There was *CATS* on Saturday and a gallery opening Sunday morning after brunch at the Plaza. A hansom cab was waiting to convey her all the way home from the office on Monday afternoon. Her bedroom blazed lunatic with flowers. There were no more ovine incidents.

He supported Public Television. He preferred Ebert to Siskel, and had no use under God's great sky for Pauline Kael, unless his sourdough recipe needed an extra shot of calcium some time. He had season tickets to the opera, though he only went for Verdi and *Peter Grimes*. Wagner upset him. Fafnir and the frost giants, you know.

She sympathized. Prejudice was so *fifties*.

He didn't like zydeco, but for her sake he tried to understand it. While Springsteen left him cold, Steeleye Span was all right, and Clam Chower, and any old Joni Mitchell. He couldn't dance at *all*. He subscribed to *The New Yorker,* though only for the cartoons. Desconstructionist criticism gave him the quinsy. He couldn't find shoes that both fit him and made a fashion statement. He wore the poorly tanned skins of those few Central

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Park carriage horses in their declining years that he had been able to purchase. He had absolutely no taste in neckties.

He insisted that she pick all the restaurants they patronized, and relied on her judgment when it came to ordering the wine.

He was just *filthy* with money, all liquid assets, mostly gold and priceless gems that he had come by in the course of his European career. He didn't really get her joke about how he'd staged unfriendly takeovers of dragon-guarded hoards, but he laughed anyway. He offered to show her the skull of the last dragon he'd killed. That had been on Orkney, and the puny size of the Worm had been what decided him to move across the sea to a fresher, more vital world. A man likes a challenge. Things were better in the Catskills.

His voice in person slowly acquired the beguilement of that same voice over the phone. At her gentle prodding, Hoffritz provided the proper tools for him to trim toenails and nose bristles. He was never late for a date. He let her pay the tab on occasion, without turning it into a favor or patronage. Three hundred years and then some could give a man a certain high octane pick-up rate in mastering the social graces, if he so wished. For her sake, he so wished, and he wasn't shy about letting her know as much. Vulnerability did not terrify him.

And she knew that he needed her.

The first time they made love, she had her qualms. She was haunted by the old chestnut about how the size of a man's nose may give the inquisitive some hint as to the relative proportion of an analogously shaped nether organ. The giant's *nose* was—well—gigantic, *voyons!* A sight too *much* so to leave the lady entirely comfortable in her mind.

Still, needs must. She wanted to. She felt a certain obligation, though through no deed or word of his. His few good-night kisses were not taken from her as if by right of conquest, or even secured as reparation for his having bought her dinner. He never treated her like a feedbag whore. All the marks of tenderness that passed between them were granted on her initiative alone. One kiss from him dewed fully half her face, left her skin atingle with moisture and mint residue from his hastily munched rolls of Breath-Savers. It was an unusual and exhilarating experience. Perverse curiosity needled her on to further experimental delvings.

Were she honest with herself, she would have admitted too that, since Ian, she was hornier than hell.

He was not so eager to accept her offer as she had imagined. "What's wrong?" she demanded. Angry gooseflesh rose beneath the peach satin of her lace-trimmed teddy. The dressing room at Victoria's Secret had been *much* warmer. Chills and rejection coupled together to nettle her deeply.

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The giant's jowls drooped, laden with rue. "Ar, it's not *you,* dearie. Sweet as fresh plums you be, and welcome as spring. All as you've done for me up to this—" he fingered the charming regimental-stripe tie she'd had custom made for him at Brooks Brothers "—that's been more'n I ever hoped for. I be content wi' that."

She crossed her arms, being unable to cross her legs. There was nothing in the room for her to sit on. Furniture had been displaced by futons, in deference to accommodating his needs. "You don't find me attractive!" she accused.

He tried to convince her otherwise, but she knew lies when she heard them. She'd lunched with enough salesfolk for that. By bullying and pouting and sniveling dangerously near the precipice of tears, she cudgeled out the truth.

"I ain't—I ain't so much—I don't got too big a—I has me lackings." He showed her proof.

Well, yes, he was right. What he said was *true.* If you were comparing him to other *giants,* that is.

She forced herself to look very solemn. She told him that size was not everything, but love conquers all. If he could lie, so could she.

They were very happy together.

Three weeks later, while she was at work, Ian called. "I've found myself," he told her. "I was right there, all along. I'm a better person now. I'm sensitive to a woman's needs. I can give you the support you want *and* the space you require. I'm ready to nurture. We can complete each other. I'm not afraid of commitment. Isn't that swell?"

"Drop dead," she said.

"But I *need* you."

Well, and what harm was there in meeting him for a drink after work, after all was said and done, after what they'd once meant to each other? She couldn't show herself to be afraid of seeing him again. They could talk about old times, catharsis over cocktails and a mouth-watering assortment of high-fiber, low-cholesterol veggies. She could handle that. She was strong. She was capable.

She was a fool for blonds with black eyebrows.

The giant's brows were black enough to satisfy, but as for *hair,* blond or otherwise, his pate gleamed smooth as a crystal goblet. Some things a woman doesn't miss until someone else points out that she does not have them. This holds as true for textured pantyhose as for men. In the bar with Ian, she found herself recalling how she used to run her fingers through his golden curls. Said fingers began to drum an antsy anthem on the sides of her lowball glass. Odd pulsings disturbed her body's chosen serenity. She really should be getting home.

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"I like what you've done with the place," Ian said, kicking off his shoes, tossing his tie onto the futon. "So tell me about your new roommate."

"She minds her own business," she said. "She doesn't ask questions, she doesn't get ideas." She brought the drinks from the living room, even though he knew where everything was kept and had offered to do it. The giant's mug was in the liquor cabinet now. Ian might *not* mistake it for an oversized, spoutless martini pitcher. Few of those had BLUNDERBORE handpainted around their circumference, or an etched pattern of grinning skulls. *Damn* few.

Ian was essentially naked when she returned. A sheet counts for little in the strategies of such impromptu dalliances. He took his drink and raised it in her honor. "To your health," he said. He sipped while she stripped and slipped between the sheets beside him. He paused. A thought had touched him.

"Speaking of which. . . ." He made a pointed inquiry into her social life since last they'd shared bedlinens.

Her eyes narrowed, her mouth screwed itself into a tight little macadamia nut of pique. "I've only seen one other man since you ran out. I'm still seeing him." She laced barbs to this last sentence but he remained unstung.

"And, uh, how well do you know him? I mean, what was he doing before he met *you?* Personal habits? Companions? Lifestyle of choice? *You* know."

"He killed dragons. He ground men's bones to make his bread. He never read any Garrison Keillor."

"Men's bones?" Ian's lovesome brows rose a moiety. "Um, did he ever give you any particular reason for, that is, in a manner of speaking, such exclusive tastes?"

"Put up," she told him, "or shut up. In fact, shut up whether you put up or no."

Ian steepled his fingers. "We are very hostile," he said, and *tsk'd* audibly.

"Blunderbore doesn't think so," she shot back. "Blunderbore isn't intimidated by a strong woman."

"Blunderbore?" Ian echoed. The steeple toppled. *"Blunderbore?"*

"It's a perfectly good name for a giant," she said, folding her arms.

Somewhere beyond the bedroom door—the apartment door, to be exact—a key jiggled in a lock.

"Your roommate?" Ian whispered.

"SURPRISE, ME DARLING!"

Oh, it was *very* sad, very sad indeed. A giant is like other men, only with a bigger heart to break. No vows had been uttered, and Blunderbore

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agreed in principle about mature adult persons in a modern relationship needing their own space, but *still*—

Temper, temper.

The bread was warm from the oven. "Have a piece, love. I'll butter it for you."

"I'm not that peckish now," said Blunderbore. He leaned his face on one hand and gazed morosely at the steaming slab, very white where it was not yellow with melting butter. "Like to clog me arteries sommat fierce, that be. Take it away."

"Tsk. You're just being difficult. You've eaten butter by the hogshead before this. And after all my trouble, following that silly old family recipe of yours. No appreciation. None whatsoever."

"Ar, all right, all right, cease yer cackling." The giant raised the slice to his lips and bit. He chewed. "Gritty," he said.

"You don't like my cooking." Ian pouted.

"Na, then, I never did say— It's *my* fault, 'tis, for not having a more careful eye at the handmill. I'll see to it as I grind 'em finer next time. Oh, it's as grand a baking as ever I've tasted, lad, and that's taking in some three hundred years. Don't take on so, there's me dearie. Come, sit you down on old Blunderbore's knee and tell us how them wicked, wicked futures traders has treated our Ian today."

Ian dimpled and dropped the sulks. Obediently he climbed the giant's knee.

Blunderbore smiled indulgently at his manling. Maybe this one would last. In a certain light, the lad looked just like Jack.

Maybe *this* one wouldn't kiss and tell. ●

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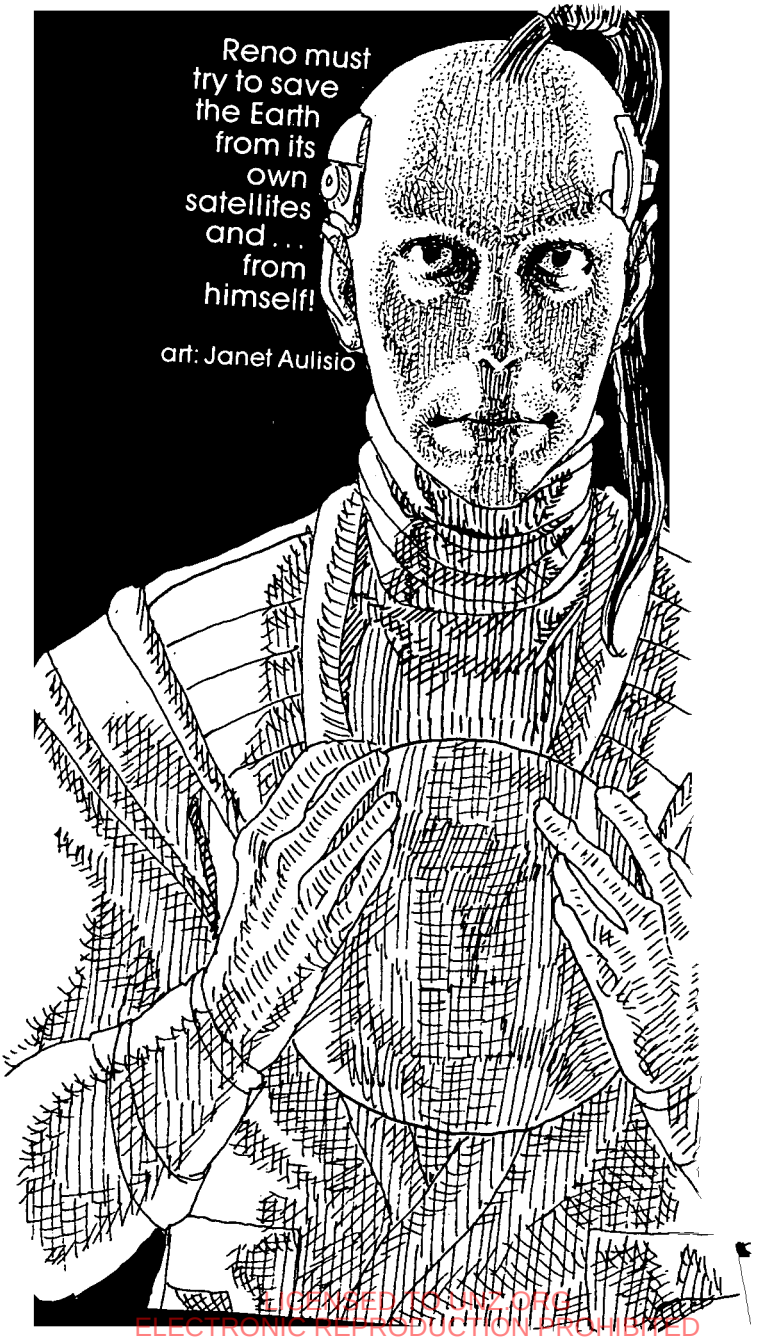

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SOLIP: SYSTEM

by Walter Jon Williams

Somewhere a voice is screaming. Reno is moving at the speed of light, and around him the universe cries in pain. Brightness dazzles his eyes. Odors sting his nostrils. Above him swim the stars, and their soft glow is blurred by tears.

He is lying on his back. Something under him makes a crumpling noise. The stars are staring with gleaming pupils of light.

Reno moves his arm. A simple thing, but he had forgotten how to do it. He wants to wipe the tears from his face, but he touches his temple by mistake and feels something different, a wire thrust into his head. His coordination has badly deteriorated. The body seems wrong. His throat aches. His mouth tastes foul.

He remembers where he is, what he intends here.

He remembers the screams were his own.

The room is large, high, all swooping curves without a single straight line. Orbital fashion, brought to Earth. Reno realizes the stars above him are holograms, hanging below the cold night ceiling.

He is lying on a bed, on a tumbled stack of computer printout. The room smells of sweat. He tries to sit up. The stars spin overhead, in his mind. He drags in air.

"Reno? Reno?" A voice in his mind. His own voice.

"I did it," Reno says. "I'm in."

"It works, then."

"It works. Leave me alone now. I'll talk later."

Something smells bad in here.

He turns his head, scans the room. There is a computer console, chairs, video monitors, a desk piled high with dirty dishes. A half-open door leads to a bathroom. His bed has burgundy silk sheets, a yellow comforter. He is dressed in white cotton drawstring trousers and nothing else. Reno pulls the wires from his head and tries to stand. He fails. The soft carpet absorbs him. He crawls toward the bathroom. The prickle of the carpet against his feet and arms feels like nails being hammered in. Inside the bathroom, the wallpaper is made of full-size photographs of refugee children, all dirty faces, bare feet, torn clothes, huge dark eyes.

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Reno reaches for the marble countertop and pulls himself upright, then to his feet. He sways as he stares into the mirror and sees a face he's never seen before. The eyes of dirty children echo his amazement.

He remembers what his friends asked him to do, in return for certain favors.

He remembers what it was like to die.

Once he had been a pilot flying contraband, then later a speculator, riding the face market up and down and making money on every financial wave. Reno's body died weeks before, the result of a fiery accident, but before the body failed entirely a pattern of Reno's mind survived in analog form, sitting in a vat of liquid crystal in Havana, in the Florida Free Zone. Reno's friends are growing a clone body for him. His mind will be read into the clone, and Reno will live again.

Reno's friends, who are paying for all of this, are not precisely disinterested. Because something called Black Mind has been uncovered, a project prepared as a secret weapon by the United States just prior to their loss in the Rock War. A project that would use neuronic interface technology against itself, would not simply make information available to the mind, but overwrite the mind with invading data.

After the U.S. lost the war the developers shut down the project, perhaps because they were unimaginative and had no orders, perhaps because they were afraid of the technology, the power it represented.

Reno's friends are not unimaginative. And they are not afraid.

And now Reno is an Orbital power himself, his brain-analog read, courtesy of Black Mind, over the forebrain of man named Albrecht Roon, an architect of the Rock War, a war criminal according to many—and a man who is, thanks to a proxy fight and considerable stock fraud, the new chairman of Tempel Pharmaceuticals Interessengemeinschaft, and about to fly from his private home in the Cordillera Oriental to his giant drug factory in the sky. . . .

Reno looks at himself in the mirror, sees a beardless, thirtyish man with a scalp lock, kohl-rimmed eyes, corroded teeth. There are dark ceramic interface sockets on his temples and over his ears, each decorated with diamond chips. His muscles are lax, and the pale flesh sags on his chest and around his middle.

Reno's not himself any more: he's died, come through the fire, been reborn.

Earth's savior.

He can't help laughing.

Albrecht Roon was an old man in his eighties, transferred nine years ago, via crystal analog, into a younger body. Brain transfer is an inexact

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science, and sometimes leads to problems of adjustment, incomplete transfer, personality changes. Until Roon could demonstrate his mind was unimpaired, he was demoted and dropped down the gravity well to prove himself again before rising on high to his former place of eminence. Dropped down to where Reno and his friends could get at him.

Where Black Mind could do its work.

It all seems insane now. Reno has no confidence in his ability to bring off the impersonation. A few minutes ago, when his consciousness consisted of a fractal analog of his original neural net, the choice had seemed simple—take over Roon's mind, take over his company, use it to benefit the planet. Now the notion is merely preposterous.

Reno runs his hand over his face. There is a sharp stink in his nostrils, and he realizes it's his own cologne. He hasn't smelled anything in so long that the sensation is oppressive. There is something horrid in his mouth. Probably his sense of taste is awakening as well.

He tries to walk. Vertigo tugs at his belly. His feet keep melting out from under him. The body is *wrong*. The arms and legs are too short. The center of gravity is off.

Reno perseveres. An appalling taste stabs his tongue like a knife. After an hour, he can walk fairly well, has begun, tentatively, to use Roon's reflexes. He returns to the bed, takes one of the phone studs and puts it in a temple socket. The phone line is still open.

"Anyone home?" he asks.

The voice that answers is his own.

Suddenly a memory comes back, returning with such force that Reno staggers. It isn't taste that he's regained, it's thirst. His tongue grates on the roof of his mouth. Now that he recognizes the sensation, the discomfort doubles.

Reno steps out of the room and into the corridor outside. Against the wall, the hologram of a refugee girl-child burns with cold laser fire. The hall curves to the left, falls slightly. He has a hard time walking. His balance isn't working properly yet, and he has difficulty coping with the way the floor keeps dropping out from under him.

Another child appears. Reno thinks she's another hologram, but then realizes that this one isn't dirty or round-bellied, that she wears a white dress and has interface sockets on her head. Her hair is clipped short and parted on the right. He thinks she is about ten. She stops her movement as he appears, moves to stand with her back to the wall, like a soldier making way for a general. She stands with her eyes down, waiting. Panic throbs in Reno's chest.

"I need a drink," Reno says. He tries to sound like a man used to giving

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orders, but his voice grates like an old file on steel and his tongue feels like a dry sponge. "Come with me."

"Sí, tío," the girl says. Her eyes are still downcast, as if she doesn't want to look at him. She turns and leads Reno down the corridor. In a cold sweat, Reno tries to remember what he knows about Roon, whether he has any family on Earth. He doesn't think so; so far as he knows, the Roon family is all in orbit.

Another child appears in the corridor. This one is a boy, dressed in dark slacks and a white shirt. His hair is short, his face sockets dark on his temples. He carries a little schoolboy satchel. Like the girl, he steps aside and stands with his back to the wall as Reno walks by.

A few steps beyond, the girl walks into another room. It's a lounge with a wet bar. Rare petroleum-plastic bottles stand ranked beneath its long mirror. Reno hurries behind the bar, almost taking a fall in his eagerness, and fills a glass with water from the tap. He drinks it eagerly.

It's the first drink in months. Water pours from the corners of his mouth, splashes on his bare chest.

He fills the glass again, drinks half of it. He puts the glass down and sees a holographic model of Jupiter hanging below the ceiling, complete with slowly orbiting moons.

The little girl is still waiting, her eyes downcast. Reno holds out the glass.

"Want some water?"

"Thank you, uncle." The reply is barely audible. She takes the glass, sips from it, stands with the glass in her hand. She never looks at him. Reno takes the glass.

"You can go," he says.

"Thank you, uncle." Moving quickly, she takes his free hand and kisses it.

As the chill wet lips touch his skin, Reno realizes what Roon has been using the children for. His flesh turns to ice. He stares at her in shock.

Above his head, frozen moons circle a planet that failed in its effort to become a sun.

By evening he has almost got used to talking to himself. The crystal analog of his mind is still in the vat in Cuba and is happy to talk to him on the phone, knowing his clone is still growing in a white, sterile room next door. It's only the Reno in Roon's body that's on a suicide mission; the other will live happily ever after on Earth.

Reno wonders which of them is the real Reno.

Then he realizes. The real Reno is dead. His brain boiled and exploded from his skull when his house caught fire. . . .

The two ghosts talk long into the night.

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* * *

Movies of Albrecht Roon flicker on the monitors. A Western American voice sounds in Reno's aural centers, someone who'd met Roon and knew him, talking to Reno through a scrambled channel.

"He talked in aphorisms. Almost as if he was white-brained, but not quite."

"A face case."

"He had his head in the interface all the time. Trying to keep track of things. He didn't have access to the big AIs in orbit, and he had to do it all himself. His rivals in orbit would have torpedoed him if they could, and he had to keep informed."

Reno watches the way Roon moved, as if he were still in orbit, drifting from place to place. Listens to the way he talked. *The architecture of the future is implied by the architecture of crystal intelligence. . . . We can integrate our consciousness with the incorruptible pefection of data. . . . Crystal recognizes only reality, only necessity.*

Roon, Reno realizes, was crazy. He's invaded the mind of a madman.

The recording ends. White noise fills the room.

"You didn't tell me about the children," Reno says.

There is a moment's silence. "Yes, I did." The voice is surprised. "That was the first thing I told you. We wouldn't have sent you in there without that."

Cold talons touch Reno's nerves as he realizes that the memory failed to implant.

He's in the head of a crazy man, and he doesn't have everything he needs to survive there.

Roon's closet is full of orbital-style clothes, shoes with velcro strips, light sleeveless cotton jackets tailored to the body so they won't billow out in freefall. No ties, since ties can catch on things. The latest cuts, the latest styles; some of the best North African designers. All the clothes fit perfectly. Roon had been planning his return to orbit for some time.

Reno pensions off the children, puts them onto a shuttle for the Florida Free Zone, where they'll be put into boarding school in Mobile. He does it by remote control; he doesn't think he can face them.

Roon's slate for the Tempel Board of Directors was confirmed before Black Mind took him. Reno absorbs everything he can find on them before he takes his private plane to the Gran Sabana port. His own knowledge may be faulty: he has to crosscheck everything.

People are waiting for him at the wide personnel lock, a long, round tube padded in white chamois brought up from Earth. He scans the faces, recognizes members of the board of directors. There's a man right in front of him, hand stuck out, and Reno recognizes him as someone named

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Jackson van Allen, an old crony of Roon's, head of the Orbital Freeport Control Commission before Roon's demotion, now back in his old slot. He looks older than the photographs in his dossier, more jowly. His blond hair is light as down, and his handshake is firm, dry.

"Herzlich wilkommen, Albrecht," the man says.

"Jackson," Reno says, and freezes. He knows what's expected, and that what's expected is German, and he doesn't know the language.

His heart lurches. He's been here two seconds, and already it's over.

"Viele grüssen, kamerad," he says, the words just coming out, and somehow he knows not only the phrase, but the fact that it's more a Bavarian saying than a northern . . . how the hell did he know that?

The corporate anthem begins to blare out of speakers. People straighten a bit, look more respectful. Reno tries to calm his panicked heart, slow his breathing.

He notes that van Allen has sockets on his head, old-fashioned metal ones. Reno makes note of that. He might have to make use of it.

The other members of the board wait behind van Allen in the airlock. Reno progresses along the chamois-lined tube and greets them all, manages to remember their names and shift the conversation to English. He's weightless here, and the board members pass him from hand to hand. Security people drift in the background, weightless, their heads turning left and right, scanning like radar receivers for things out of place. They're all mercenaries from Earth: Reno isn't about to trust people belonging to the previous administration.

Cold surges up his spine. These are some of the people, he realizes, who plotted the Rock War, who schemed not only for independence for the Orbital habitats—an independence which might have some point—but who had planned to seize control of the Earth as well. The men and women who had drowned Earth's hopes in a barrage of falling stars, artificial asteroids that crushed cities, crushed dreams. . . .

"Ladies and gentlemen, there will be a full board meeting tomorrow," Reno says. "For today, I want only to get my reflexes back. And celebrate being in space again, and among my friends." They applaud politely: their grip shoes hold them at all angles, upside-down, rightside-up, cockbill. Reno smiles, his lips tight over corroded teeth. "Tomorrow," he says, "we'll start putting out affairs back in orbit."

Van Allen follows him out of the airlock. Reno flails for a moment, and van Allen grabs him by the sleeve. With van Allen's help, Reno manages to plant his grip shoes on velcro strips by the airlock door.

"Reflexes gone, eh?" van Allen asks. In English, thank god.

"I'll get them back." Reno's heart is thundering. He has the impression that he's staring wildly: he tries to calm himself.

Van Allen leans closer. His eyes are hard.

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"What happens now, Albrecht?"

Reno looks at him. "We take the next step," he says. It seems to be the answer van Allen wants.

"Our stock has risen by three hundred percent following the actions of the Orbital Soviet and my announcement of a policy of retrenchment," Reno says. "In a few more days or weeks, after the common stock ceases to be the subject of such widespread speculation, we can expect it to return to pre-crash levels. And retrenchment *is* our policy for the present. But I want us to be looking beyond retrenchment, beyond merely maintaining our position."

Reno is happy to be in gravity again, in the huge rotating cylinder that is Tempel Habitat One. The long Tempel boardroom table is a half-inch laser-sliced ovoid, asteroid material, coated in smooth gas-planet plastic and gleaming softly with flecks of silicon and nickel. Placed around the table are nine of the fourteen board members. The rest, in the Ukraine or South Africa or the Belt, watch through coded communications links. Reno can see their faces on video monitors inset into the ceiling, all except the woman in the Belt, who is so far away that she can't effectively participate and is recording the meeting for viewing later.

"We're still weak in aerospace," Reno says. "Almost forty percent of our cargoes are moved in carriers belonging to other companies. Although we can begin to build our own fleet, it will have to be done almost from scratch, and will prove an unacceptable drain on our now-scarce capital. The board should contemplate a takeover attempt."

Board members cast surreptitious glances at one another. On the video monitors, heads appear to be consulting their control switches.

"Albrecht," says Viola Ling, the head of the Pharmaceutical Division. Her eyes are uneasy. "Your predecessor. . . ."

"My predecessor failed in just such an attempt at takeover," Reno says. "Yes. That is correct." He looks at each of the members in turn and sees them full of doubt. He tries to think of Roon sitting in his alloy house in the Cordillera Oriental, alone in the dark with his phantom stars. Tries to think of the mind that built the place, the flowing corridors, arching ceilings, swollen-bellied holographic reminders of squalor and death. Tries to remember the incantatory, evocative way he spoke, as if delivering his monologues to the stars themselves. "My predecessor was unsubtle. He had a military background: his actions were direct and easy to counter. Stock manipulation, direct action, sabotage . . . inelegant. Inefficient." He looks at each again, turning at the last to van Allen, seeing the answering resonance in van Allen's expectant eyes. "We must learn to be more subtle than Mr. Couceiro," he says. "More careful in

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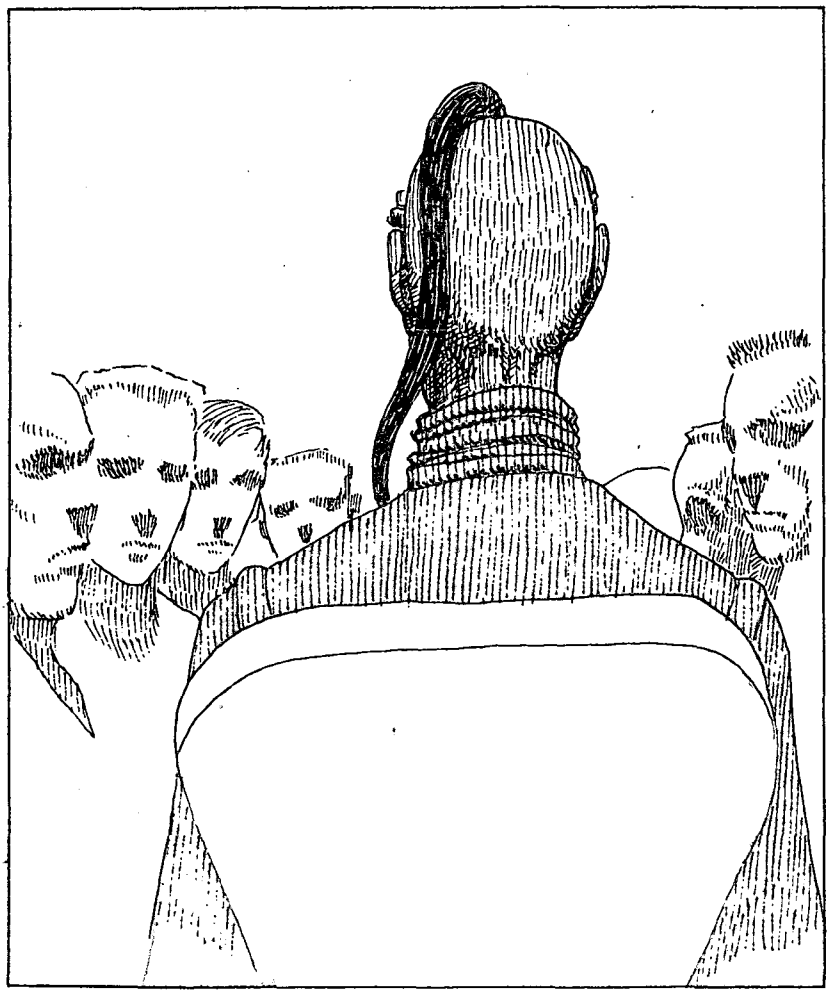
our movements. We have some time before we move into the next stage. And when we do, we must be ready."

Reno turns to Viola Ling and smiles. "Don't worry, Viola. Your Research Division is our mainstay. You won't lose your funding. Not this time."

"Thank you, Mr. Roon," she says. He senses something wrong in the way she reacts to him, as if she finds him distasteful. She has turned her head away, and Reno wonders if Roon used his corroded teeth as a weapon, smiling when he wished to intimidate, make people give way.



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Yet Viola Ling has always been one of Roon's allies, had been exiled to a research lab in central Russia after she backed one of his attempts to return to power.

Perhaps, he thinks, she's heard about the children.

Reno rates a room with an actual window to the outdoors, one at the far end of the Orbital habitat, insulated from his employees by a screen of Japanese security and from Earth by vacuum and radiation. The room is paneled in teak. A Miró and a Velázquez watch each other from opposite walls; a giant hologram-simulation of the station, slowly rotating, faces his desk. He plants his bare feet on Navajo rugs worth tens of thousands of dollars and watches Earth, the startlingly pure blue and white, brown and silver snakes that are rivers filled with erosion, the fragmented coastlines where the rising seas are eating the land, just as Earth's remaining resources are being eaten by the population. Soon the population may be the only resource left. The Orbitals were once their hope, a gateway to new resources. Now the Orbitals stand like a wall between Earth and its broken dreams, claiming the future for their own.

Reno can't change that, not even with Black Mind. The Orbitals hold the high ground, and the Earth hasn't anything left with which to take it.

All Reno can do is try to give Earth some relief. "I want a private comm link set up between my office and this address in Havana," he says. He holds out a data cube.

"Yes, sir." Akinari is one of his Japanese mercenaries. Reno likes the Japanese for their stylish sense of loyalty: if they ever betray him, it will be in a big way, no sniveling half-measures but a true apocalypse, death and mad excess and a rain of blood. . . .

"Please tell Mr. van Allen he can come in."

"Sir. Thank you, sir."

Akinari leaves, taking with him Reno's private link with his ghost self. He needs a way to communicate with his friends on the ground.

Van Allen enters and takes the drink and the chair that Reno offers him. He looks clumsier in gravity than in freefall, and paunchier.

"You've settled in?" van Allen asks.

Reno nods. "I want to tour everything in my first week," he says. "Every lab, every office. Let everyone know I'm here and responsive."

"I'm sure they'll be reassured to know you're among us."

"I hope so." That really isn't the reason for his intended tours: in reality Reno's trying to find reasons to delay making any major decisions until he feels more confident.

He can't delay this, however. Van Allen and Roon had been close; van Allen is obviously expecting something from him.

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"Jackie," Reno says. His voice is tentative, his nerves hum in fear. That's what van Allen's dossier said his friends called him.

"Al." Reno feels his tension ease. That wasn't the wrong opening.

"I wanted to have a talk with you about how I see things," Reno says.

"I'm flattered. Thank you."

"You've earned my confidence. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you." Which is probably not true, but seems a good opening.

Van Allen looks at his drink. "Thank you, Al."

Reno perches on the edge of his desk. Earthlight burns on van Allen's face, showing the broken veins, the pouched cheeks, the puffiness around the eyes of someone who spends a lot of time in freefall. "I'm trying to look at the long term, Jackie," Reno says. "I've been into the deep crystal here, and I've seen some things that bother me."

Van Allen seems surprised. "Projections are up."

"Short-term projections, yes. But the primary market for pharmaceuticals is on Earth, and Earth is running out of the resources to pay for them. A large percentage of our profits has been from the manipulation of the market, and the Earth people have been getting smarter in ways of circumventing our manipulations. No, Jackie, we've got to look outward."

Van Allen looks up involuntarily, past Reno and the rotating globe to the cold glitter of the stars beyond. "We're not suited for that."

"We've got to be ready for the next step. We—the Orbital blocs—have been diverting too much of our attention, and too many of our resources, to keeping the Earth under our domination. There's no reason for that. The Earth is finished anyway. We've got to be ready for the next fight, and that's going to be waged beyond Earth orbit, for the resources that lie out there."

Van Allen nods slowly. "So that's why you want transportation."

"We've got what we want from Earth, Jackie," Reno says. "We've got our freedom. But what have we done with it?"

Van Allen considers. He hasn't resisted the idea at all: he's already considering how to implement it. "Ling isn't going to like this. It will mean degrading the Pharmaceutical Division."

"The PD's vital. But it's not the future."

Van Allen's tongue, a washed-out pink in Earthlight, touches his lips. "We could give her a directorship of another division. One that will be emphasized under your program. Promise her that in return for a few more years' good work with Pharmaceuticals."

Reno feels relief turn to triumph. "Very good, Jackie." Van Allen looks up at him. "I think we're going to make this transition work." Reno looks into van Allen's eyes, seeing the Earthlight shining there. He puts a

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hand on van Allen's shoulder. "I want you to help me manage it. No one can do it better."

"Thank you, Al. You know, it sounds strange speaking to someone who looks as young as you—" He grins uncertainly. "But you've always been a father to me."

"Welcome to the top," Reno says, and answers the grin. "My son."

The little man smiles at the sight of two women engaged in mutual foreplay. One is black, the other blonde. "I like the blonde," says the little man.

Reno smiles back. "She can be yours," he says.

The little man raises an inhaler of snapcoke to his nose and fires a pair of torpedoes to his brain. "I'll take my time," he says.

The black woman has just produced a little crystal dildo attached with laseroptic wire to her head studs. She begins to copulate with the blonde via computer interface. Reno has to admit a certain imagination is present in the staging, on the blue and red spotlights that highlight the action, that gleam off the little dildo.

The little man's name is Lippman, and he is Reno's guest at Tempel's executive brothel. Lippman is a major figure in transport in South America west of the Andes, his firm moving Tempel's product from the Gran Sabana spaceport. He's just come up the well to sign a new contract that should allow him to finance an expansion of his company and provide him with a lot of Tempel's business, in return for which Lippman and his family will forfeit most of their control and receive their ticket off the dead zone of Earth and into the Orbital ruling class. It's a perfectly sensible arrangement, one that Albrecht Roon had been trying to make previous to his re-ascension, and that his enemies had blocked for reasons more political than economic.

Now all that's needed is the appropriate thumbprints and an appropriate South American bonding ritual, in this case a visit to the whorehouse. The whorehouse itself is a private club catering to high-level executives and their guests, the walls black, the floor and ceiling mirrored. There are floor shows and a very good litejack band. The hostesses mix dangerous martinis and also sleep with you. They're on salary and are ordered to refuse all tips.

The official reason for the place is that unlicensed sex is a security risk. It's better to get laid in a place where hygiene is taken care of and blackmail is an impossibility—unless of course it's Tempel I.G. doing the blackmailing with recordings made through two-way mirrors and concealed audio pickups.

But that's the official reason. The real reason for the place has to do with power. The Orbitals embrace a wide variety of passions, but the

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greatest is the need for strength, for potence. Weakness is forbidden; the Orbitals are winners in war and everything else, and as powerful a passion as sex can threaten the illusion of omnipotence. Here, sex is removed from anything real, anything threatening. The parody of sex exhibited in the floor show is intended as an exorcism of the real thing and the passions it implies. Passion is to be made harmless here, turned into something hygienic, sterile, acceptable. Anyone foolish enough to do something genuine, anything worth getting blackmailed over, deserves only what he gets.

Reno's ordered a clean room for Lippman. Tempel already owns him: the company doesn't need to gather compromising data on a loyal subject.

The drum synthesizer beats seven against sixteen. Lippman leans closer to get a better view of the action. Reno reaches into his pocket and takes out an envelope. He pushes it across the table to Lippman.

"A year's complimentary membership," he says.

Lippman laughs and buys Reno a drink. Shortly thereafter he's got the black girl and the little blonde bouncing on his knees. Reno decides it's time to make his own choice.

He finds a hostess who approximates his type: tall, rangy, young enough not to seem too jaded. She has a wicked laugh that he finds attractive. The sex is technically perfect; but somehow it doesn't interest Reno very much. Too hygienic, he concludes.

He returns to the brothel in the next few weeks, visits the tall hostess again, then others. The sex grows more imaginative, but the experience doesn't change much.

Strange. They were all his type.

He stares at the rolling planet and listens to his own voice clanging in his head, vibrating his implant crystal. He's worked out security procedures with his ghost brother: the scrambler code will be changed daily, and the codes generated on Earth, a week's worth of codes brought up at a time, straight from Havana to Reno's office.

"I have a few ideas," Reno says. "I've been into the deep crystal here. I've got access to everything: I think there are things here that no one knows about. But I can't deal with it all. I'm working twelve, sixteen hours per day. I've got the access, but I don't have the time."

The other Reno, the crystal ghost, burbles his answer. "Send it to me. I can sift the data faster than you."

"Good. I'll do that." He flexes a shoulder. He's been working out, trying to tone Roon's slack muscles, and his frame is full of minor aches these days.

"One thing more," he says. "We've got to guard Black Mind."

"Yes."

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"How many people know about it?"

"Cowboy and Sarah, among our own people."

"They can be trusted."

"Outside of our group, a dozen or so. All CIA or computer jocks."

"That's too many," Reno says.

The ghost's answer is prompt. "That is correct."

It's the right decision, but Reno wonders at the calm way the ghost can condemn a dozen people to death. Reno thinks of the pattern in its crystal matrix, its lightspeed thought. He thinks of all the things he had to relearn—walking, smelling, what it meant to be thirsty. The ghost, he thinks, is growing more and more remote from those memories, growing away from them. Losing all humanity as it waits in its tank.

The clone is almost ready. Reno wishes his brother well, but he needs to make use of the ghost before he transfers.

Little movements are made on the planet, propelled by a minuscule fraction of Tempel's muscle. Eighteen people die in various ways: bullets, poison, accidents. A few others are permitted to live under house arrest in the Tempel compound in Orlando. The lab in Havana becomes a subdivision of Tempel Pharmaceuticals I.G. Akinari's mercenaries stand guard around the building. Black Mind is secured.

No one, barring some local police making pro forma inquiries, seems interested at all. Few people on the planet want to inquire into why the Orbitals want to do what they do.

It's obviously not healthy.

"Mr. Roon." She doesn't look at him, this waif; her vision is focused on his belt buckle. She's twenty-two and painfully thin; her brown eyes are large, heavy with mascara; her dark hair is short and swept back in wings over her ears. There are face sockets in her head. She holds her briefcase in front of her with both hands.

Reno sits down in his chair. The Earth spins behind him. "Sit down, Miss Calderon."

He finds himself staring at her, and wonders why.

There's a problem in the SPS division, Reno has discovered: necessary data hasn't been arriving on time, or has arrived garbled. It's difficult to find out what's happening out on the power satellites. There's no one out there charged with the responsibility of reporting to Tempel HQ; the managers report when they get around to it, or not at all. Reno concludes he needs a liaison with the bureaucracy in the satellites, a personal representative free to take a tug to the stations and gather the data herself. The job isn't critical—the future of the company won't depend on it—and no one in a senior position would be interested. Reno's had

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Personnel send five people his way, and Mercedes Calderon is one of them, the last he's seen.

A refugee, he knows, from the rock that fell on Panama City; she got a scholarship to the Krupp College of Engineering in Bogota and has a first-class degree. She knows solar power systems inside-out, she's familiar with computers and statistics, and has been getting outstanding reports from her superiors.

There's something about her, some whisper of memory, like déjà vu. Reno doesn't know what it is. He's certain he's never seen her before.

"I realize this position is well outside the normal track," Reno says, "but it isn't permanent. This job will last a few years at most, and then, assuming all is satisfactory, a promotion will be coming your way. To a supervisory post, if you want it."

Her eyes come up, but not to him; she looks at Earth. He can see its crescent reflected in her pupils, a little mad wink of white light. For some reason Reno shivers. "I'd like that, sir," she says. Her voice is almost inaudible.

He wonders if she's got enough drive to confront the SPS people when she needs to, to demand the data they've been sitting on. She's qualified in all other respects.

She glances nervously at him, then looks down again. Reno feels himself shift uncomfortably in his chair. He keeps looking at her. Wondering.

"Tell me about yourself," he says.

Her eyes turn to his in stunned amazement. He can't understand why.

Even after he chooses her for the post, she stays on his mind.

Thirteen board members face him across the asteroid-slice table: the fourteenth is still in transit from the Belt. She is not made a party to this session: the contents are too sensitive to transmit even by code.

"I have looked at the profiles for the transportation companies that have been submitted," Reno says. He holds a data cube in his hands; he tosses it from one hand to the other. "I think that Osmanian A.G. will suit our needs best. A merger would suit both our interests."

Reno can see people exchanging glances. "Mr. Roon." It's Herschel, the man who conducted the study. He seems to be struggling rather hard to conceal his annoyance. "Osmanian is ostensibly a public company, but in fact its actual ownership is very private. Abdallah Sabah is a very independent man; he has a controlling interest, and the rest of the stock is divided along clan lines. No non-Somali has a substantial interest. And they stick together."

"I am aware of that." Roon looks at him coolly. "There is stiff competition in aerospace, and they can benefit from our financial muscle power. Their orbital assembly plant is new, produces state-of-the-art

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equipment, and can easily be expanded to meet our increased needs. They have a fifty-year lease on the African Horn launching site. Our marketing division can be put at their disposal. They can teach our own transport division a great deal. The logic," he smiles, "the logic of the numbers compels our union."

That, Reno thinks, and the logic of Black Mind.

"Sabah isn't precisely a logical man," Herschel objects.

"Perhaps he only has to be approached the right way," Reno says, and smiles with his decaying teeth. Herschel looks away.

"Let us prepare an offer," Reno says. "If it is a good one, if it has the right logic, the answer will be inevitable."

"Your offer is kind," says Abdallah Sabah. "I regret we must refuse." Reno can see Sabah through his video connection. The old patriarch is in his eighties and is dressed in an old-fashioned Savile Row suit, striped tie and all. He speaks English with an Italian accent, and is drinking tea from a silver cup. The wall behind him is covered in silk wallpaper with a pink flower design. Patterned sockets stand out on his bald skull.

"I am sorry to hear this, sir." Reno has called Sabah on a private conference line; he's made his offer, showed how it would benefit Osmanian Source. The old man has remained polite, but has steadily refused.

"There is one other thing, sir," Reno says. He lifts an interface stud. "One last offer. Would you humor me and face in? I would prefer not to speak this aloud."

Sabah frowns, then agrees. "If you like, Mr. Roon," he says. "Though it won't change my mind."

"Give me this one chance." He studs into the face, then smiles as he pulses a mental signal to Havana.

The ghost rises, a whine of data transmitted by crystal, by optic wire and radio link, a rising wave of darkness invading Sabah's mind. Reno sees the old man slump in his chair, try to raise a hand to his forehead to yank the stud away, sees the hand fall. Tremors move over the old man's face. Saliva glistens on his lower lip. Reno turns away, unable to watch. Black Mind shrieks over the radio link.

The transmission ends. The cold hiss of space fills the radio link. Reno looks at his video again, sees that nothing has changed. The old man continues to stare blankly at the camera.

Reno terminates the transmission. Black Mind worked or it didn't. If it worked, the ghost will call him back.

He waits, watching Earth tumble against the black velvet night.

There is no call.

Black Mind has failed.

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Word comes, through private sources, that Abdallah Sabah has had a breakdown. Reno calls to express his concern, speaks to other members of the family. The old man had driven the strongest members away, and used the weakest ruthlessly: there's no one left with the founder's inner power, or his vision. The inevitability of Reno's logic becomes clear.

The merger is voted on, and passed.

The board offers their congratulations. Three expressionless Somali faces look at him from behind the round meteor table. *My praetorians,* Reno thinks.

Reno wonders about the old man in his weightless padded cell, two personalities warring in his head, raging at one another, struggling for control. The strong old Somali, and the ghost that has tried to possess him.

Reno looks at the board and smiles. His power is secure: they don't know how he brought it off, but he's lucky and they won't betray him as long as his luck holds.

"The next step," he says. "Always the next step."

Mercedes Calderon is back from her first trip, sitting across from his desk, wearing a navy jacket over a blue pinstripe shirt. The holo image of Habitat One rotates ponderously behind her. With her briefcase clasped in her two hands, she looks like a starving schoolgirl. She's got her information, and she projects raw figures into the vid set on his desk. She talks rapidly about methods of analyzing the data and raises a hand to brush her hair back over her ear. Her wrist is knobbed, the arm sticklike. She looks more emaciated than the last time he'd seen her. She won't return his glance.

She's not Reno's type. He doesn't know why he can't stop looking at her.

She falls silent. He glances at the vid set and sees she's come to the end of her presentation.

"Thank you, Mercedes," Reno says. He stands up. "I'll review the data again later. You've done very well."

"Thank you, sir," she says, almost voicelessly. He stands up to show her to the door.

"Are you well?" he asks. "You don't look as if you've been eating."

"It's just the strain of travel. I only need some rest." It's the same toneless voice.

He puts his hand on her shoulder, feels the skin drawn taut over sharp bone. She doesn't react to his touch, just stops and stares at the door he hasn't yet opened. Her cheeks are dead pale. Behind her the holo habitat rolls on, oblivious.

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Reno realizes that she won't react no matter what, that she's as inert as the cotton fabric beneath his fingers. He touches her chin, turns her head, kisses her. Her lips are cool. Her eyes avoid his. He can see the pulse beating in her throat.

Flame licks Reno's nerves. She isn't his type, he thinks.

He leads her to his adjoining apartments, takes off her clothes, pushes her down on the bed. The roof tents over her in a series of smooth interlocking non-Euclidian curves. She doesn't speak. He can count the hollows between each rib. He touches her, strokes her skin lightly. No matter what he does, she doesn't react. He takes her chin in his hand, turns her toward him.

"Look at me," he says. She obeys. In the half-light her shadowed eyes seem as large as staring craters of the moon.

Suddenly there is fire. Somehow he knows how to touch her, make her react, give her pleasure. She clings to him, her hipbones sharp against his skin. Little cries arise from her throat, are absorbed by the room's perfect architecture.

She isn't his type, Reno thinks.

Afterwards Reno has a meeting, and it's too important to cancel. She lies like a broken stick-figure in the bed while he dresses in silence. He feels her eyes on him. He doesn't know what to say.

She says it for him. She sits on the edge of the bed as he is about to leave and takes his hand. He is surprised by the cool touch of her lips on his knuckle.

His blood freezes in the knowledge of what Mercedes is about to say.

"Gracías, tío."

Thank you, uncle.

Reno is sweating as he scans through her file. Where can it have happened?

There. Roon's path might have crossed with Mercedes' eight years before, just after he'd received his demotion and dropped to South America. She was at some kind of refugee school in Panama City. Roon would have had a lot of business at the Panama spaceport.

The name of Albrecht Roon is not to be found on her records, but a surprising number of high-ranking Tempel officials seem to have written recommendations for her. That's the evidence, then, the smoking gun. Perhaps Roon was being more careful about his passions then, but he'd still pulled strings for his protégée, got her into college and then into orbit. Being kind, by his lights. Maybe, before he'd gone insane in his little Cordillera paradise, he'd had a conscience, and tried to pay it off.

Reno can't stop thinking about her, the sharp angles of her body, the mad deep craters of her eyes. He spends most of the night in a fever,

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working, clearing his computer of all open files. Then he heads for the executive brothel. It's late and the floor show is over, the band gone home. He finds a woman, someone his type, yawning over a cordial at the mirrored bar. With her he tries to fuck Mercedes out of his mind. He is desperate to need this woman, find in her something he actually wants. He spends the night there, the tired whore wrapped in his arms. In the morning he takes her again, bulling her in a thunderous display of vigorous lust, hoping to find in her somnolent, sterile flesh an antidote to the acid that is searing a path through his veins. The passion remains his alone.

The next day he wanders through his schedule in a frantic display of failed concentration. Mercedes is continually floating through his thoughts. He decides he has to speak to her, explain things somehow.

She appears in his office carrying her briefcase in her knobby hands. Her eyes are rimmed with red, her cheeks are hollow. She doesn't look as if she's slept, either.

Reno has planned to say all manner of things, make all manner of apologies. "Miss Calderon," he begins, and then she takes his hand and kisses it, and at the brush of her lips on his knuckle Albrecht Roon's madness rises, all the animal lunacy that Reno had thought was buried beneath the coded onslaught of Black Mind. Reno lifts her in his arms and the briefcase tumbles to the office floor. He carries her to his apartments. She is weightless as a wand.

This time she isn't passive; she clutches his body with her hands, her legs, demands the pleasure he gives her. There is surprising strength in her spidery frame.

After their spasm the strength fades, and suddenly Mercedes seems a desolate fawn, all knees and elbows and sharpened bone, an angular contrast to the smooth polymer curves of the room. Reno gathers her in his arms. Her eyes avoid his.

"Thank you, uncle," she says.

"Don't call me that." Reno's answer is instant and sharp.

Mercedes doesn't seem surprised. Perhaps it's what she expects from him. "Yes, Mr. Roon," she says.

Vague bits of his planned speech resurface in his consciousness. "You're not the girl you were," he says. "I'm not the man I was." True as this last statement is, his words sound heavy, leaden. He isn't convinced himself.

"We should start something new," he says. "Don't kiss my hand any more. You're my lover, not my pet."

"Yes. If you like." He can't tell if she's absorbed any of this. She's become passive again, a reflection of him.

"Call me Reno," he says. And for the first time, she seems surprised.

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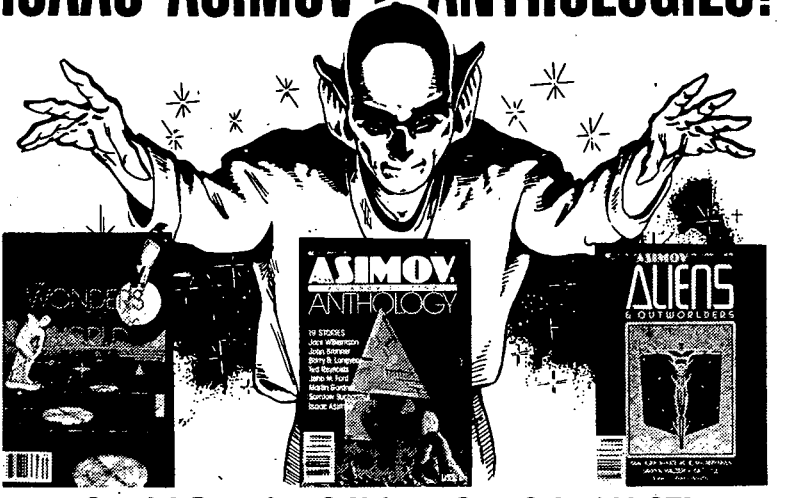

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* * *

The ghost brother's voice sounds as if it's drowning in a tank of liquid glass, transformed but ringing with clarity. Little inflection is left, little to indicate personality. Little that is human.

"The transfer failed. The clone wouldn't take the program and went into seizure instead."

"I'm sorry. I will order another clone prepared."

"That's already been done. I suspect it won't work."

Reno is suprised. "Why not?"

"I believe our original program was damaged in transfer to the tank. It was done under emergency circumstances, when we were trapped by the fire, and it may not have all come across."

Reno gazes into the black velvet coldness beyond his window. "Why did Black Mind work for me, then?" he asked.

"Because Black Mind wrote over a mind already inhabited by a personality. Roon's personality was already there to fill the gaps in the program."

A tremor runs along Reno's nerves. "I've wondered about some things," he says. "How easily I've got along here. How I've always seemed to know what to do." He casts a glance toward the door that leads to his private apartments, where Mercedes had been only a few hours before. "Some feelings I've had," he says, "that I didn't have before."

"That's not unusual with mind transfer. Personality change is a hazard."

"I'll get you into a body," Reno says. "I have a plan."

"Don't rush things. I can wait."

"Perhaps not."

There is a short pause. "What did you mean by that?"

"We've talked too long on this channel. I'll send a coded package with the next messenger." Reno switches off.

He looks toward the door to his apartments and thinks of Mercedes. Now he knows why he wants a woman who isn't his type.

Roon is living inside him, in the gaps between his own program.

And Roon is mad.

"My father is still . . . not well," says Mohammad.

"I'm sorry. He is a great man."

"He talks strangely. Of things he has never seen, people he has not met." He sips his little gold-rimmed cup of tea. Behind him, the holo habitat gleams in sunlight. "There are those in the family who believe he is possessed by a devil. There have been. . . ." He gives a wry smile. ". . . attempts at exorcism."

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"I can understand the family's concern, particularly when conventional modes of treatment fail. More tea?"

"Thank you, sir."

There are other ways of knowing people besides bringing them to brothels. Mohammad is a strict Muslim, and in his case the executive brothel would not be a good idea. But even in a Puritan there is always a key.

Mohammad hates his father.

Mohammad is one of Abdallah's sons, one of the most capable and one of those the old man drove into semi-exile. When Reno called him to the Tempel board, Mohammad was running an insignificant transport operation in the Ogaden. He's tall, hawk-nosed, probably brilliant. Reno needs someone to negotiate the labyrinth of Osmanian, the strange network of kinship systems and obligation that serves the transport company in place of a formal structure. He needs someone smart enough to manipulate that complex system, and for that wants someone more loyal to him than to the company, to the cousins who were promoted ahead of him.

And Mohammad hates his father. Maybe he's looking for another father-figure, a man who lives in the sky and has his best interests at heart. Someone like Albrecht Roon.

"Your reports have been outstanding," Reno says.

"Thank you, Mr. Roon."

"I'm prepared to go to the board with the proposal for the new Century Series of fast frigates. We need to move quickly on that matter if the public is to believe that Osmanian's efficiency won't be hampered by the acquisition."

"Sir. I'm very pleased."

"I suspect your abilities are a little constricted in your present circumstance. Perhaps your talents can be better utilized in another direction."

Mohammad sips his tea. "Yes?"

"Acquisitions."

Earthlight glimmers in Mohammad's deep eyes. "I'm interested, sir."

Mercedes lies with her eyes closed, her head partly turned away. She is passive again, a straw doll in Reno's bed. Her passivity drives him into frenzy: he uses her fiercely, desperate to force some reaction from her. Her breath quickens; she bites her lip to stifle a sound. That suppressed cry is enough to trigger his climax.

Afterward Mercedes lies motionless on the dull maroon sheets, still the straw doll. He thinks of the clone dying, its brain an erupting electrical storm, and of what fills the gaps in his own pattern. Albrecht Roon,

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the architect of the Rock War, with the blood of millions on his hands. Despoiler of children, and of the straw doll lying in Reno's bed.

A wave of disgust washes over Reno's mind. He is compounding Roon's crime, victimizing a woman who has already been victimized more than anyone could possibly deserve.

With a shock he realizes that she hates him. Hates him so much that she can't even move when he touches her.

"You don't have to do this," he says.

Her eyes open slowly, as if she is arising from a dream. She takes a breath. "Do what?" she asks.

"Have sex with me. Not if it's just because I'm your boss. That's not . . . what I want from you."

"What *do* you want from me, then?"

"What do *you* want? That's my question."

Mercedes gazes at the ceiling. Reno watches the pulse beat in the shadowed hollow above the sharp relief of her clavicle.

"I know you like me to be still and not move," she says. She seems to be talking to the ceiling. "I try to do that for you. But sometimes I want you so much that I have to bite my cheeks and tongue to keep from crying out. Sometimes I want to scream with what I feel for you."

Reno feels blood rush to his skin. He reaches a hand to her, turns her face to his. "You don't have to lie still," he says. "You can do what you want. This is something we can share."

Her expression is faintly puzzled. He doesn't know whether he's been understood. He doesn't want her on Roon's terms. He doesn't know how else to explain it to her.

Mercedes leans forward, brushes her lips against his. He strokes the back of her neck. Her fingertips slide over his body. He can feel the touch of her breath on his neck. His skin seems aflame.

There is a peculiar intent look on her face. She is exploring the relationship between them, her movements still tentative, her mind investigating possibilities.

He closes his eyes and lies back while she caresses him. By now he is perfectly engorged. She throws a leg over him, rides him astride.

Reno looks up at her angular body, the flesh stretched over her ribs into ridges and valleys, the skin drawn so tight over her sharp shoulders that he wonders how it isn't worn through. She looks as though she's been living in a refugee camp for years.

Roon has done this, he thinks. Twisted her, driven her, probably come close to breaking her. But he also taught her to love. Even if that love is for a monster, it's still something Reno wants to cherish.

But it's not for him. As she rides him to climax, she cries out not for Reno, but for Tío.

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Uncle. A monster. And, in the U.S., a term of surrender.

Mercedes has left Habitat One on another data-collection job to the power satellites. Reno is free to purge her from his blood, extend the work he has begun.

He takes van Allen to the executive whorehouse. A new stage show features a man with a grafted artificial penis, black and preposterously large, studded with metal and cruel barbed hooks. With this apparatus he gives apparent satisfaction to several willing partners. Jarring feedback wails from the amps. Reno wonders what manner of genitalia have been implanted in these women for them to be able to affect enjoyment of this. No doubt he's intended to wonder.

Van Allen enjoys the show. His eyes sparkle, his pouched cheeks glow with excitement.

The bugged rooms here, Reno decides, are crude, inelegant. And unnecessary when people hand you keys to their minds just by watching stage shows. Not when they show you, just from what they stare at, that they want power and potency so exaggerated as to seem ridiculous.

"Jackie," Reno says. "I wanted to talk to you about the next step."

Van Allen looks up, interest in his eyes. "Yes, Al?" he asks.

"I don't like the projections," Reno says. "In the short term our current rate of profit will continue, but in the long term—even with the acquisition of Osmanian, we're still going to encounter a shortfall." He looks at van Allen and smiles. "I want to be here for the long term, Jackie. I'm sure you do, as well."

"With Osmanian," van Allen says, "we have the basic tools for expansion. We haven't employed them yet. Haven't had time, really."

"I want to reach for self-sufficiency," says Reno. "Acquiring Osmanian has strained our energy resources. Their plants take a lot of power, and mostly they're buying it."

Van Allen purses his lips. "I don't know if we can smoothly absorb another company. Our structure isn't. . . ."

"I didn't mean another takeover attempt," Reno says. "I agree, there's danger in expanding too fast. But there's danger if we continue our dependency." He leans close to van Allen, forces intimacy. Van Allen has to strain to hear him over the litejack band.

"I think the days of the United Orbital Soviet are numbered, Jackie," he says.

Van Allen is disturbed. He looks at the stage show, frowns, thinks about it for a long moment.

"Consider what I'm saying, Jackie," says Reno. "I saw the need for the Orbital Soviet twenty years ago; I helped create it. The Soviet was set up to fight for our independence, then to control Earth once we'd won

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the fight. Earth is beaten. Now we can't *help* but control the planet: the Orbital economies are too critical, too huge. The Orbital Soviet is losing its reason to exist."

Van Allen doesn't seem to want to commit himself to this idea just yet. "Perhaps," he says. "But what does that mean for us?"

"We've been controlling distribution of our product on Earth by subsidizing some operations at a loss to drive Earth competition under, or by forming cartels with other companies to exploit a given market. We've been selling to the black market in order to have a measure of control over their operations. One thing we really *don't* do is compete." Reno shakes his head as screams of feedback accompany a simulated orgasm. "We're not set up for competition. We're not efficient enough, not streamlined enough. We don't command enough resources to be able to compete effectively. And too many of our resources are siphoned off into trying to control Earth."

Van Allen's face is solemn. The stage show appears to have lost his interest. "What you're saying is very dangerous," he says.

"Reality," says Reno, "is dangerous." He gazes coldly into van Allen's eyes. "Power," he says, "is dangerous." Van Allen considers this. Reno puts a hand on his shoulder. "We live in dangerous times, Jackie. That's why we need to be self-sufficient in power. I don't want our new factories hostage to someone throwing a switch."

Van Allen draws back, putting room between them. Litejack crashes from the speakers set in the ceiling. "You obviously have something in mind."

"General Power Systems Satellite Number Four. Their latest. The Singapore bloc mortgaged themselves to the hilt to build it."

"That would serve our present and future needs very well." Objectively. "It's the biggest GPS has built."

"We'll need the help of someone in the Pharmaceutical Research Division. Someone who isn't Viola Ling. I don't want to involve her in this."

"I think I know what you want," van Allen says. His eyes have a familiar light in them, the same light Reno saw when van Allen was watching the man wielding his lethal phallus.

"Then I won't have to say it," Reno says. "And that's all the better in a place like this."

Later, after van Allen disappears with his partner for the evening, Reno steps to the bar and watches the bar mirror, the images of the hostesses as they move from place to place, their walk studied, their smiles bright, their eyes dead. He can't seem to get interested in any of them.

They're not his type any more.

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Later that week he has his rotten teeth pulled, replaced with strong ceramic-over-alloy implants.

When the emergency signal goes out from GPS Four, the nearest ship is the prototype Century Series frigate. Mohammad is aboard, supervising the new warship on its trials. He orders the trials aborted, and the frigate diverts on a rescue mission.

Mohammad arrives five hours after the distress call. He finds the eighteen-man crew dead of some unknown disease. He enters the station alone and seals himself in.

Using the station radio, Mohammad files a claim for salvage with the High Court of the United Orbital Soviet. General Power Systems protests.

GPS is in debt, and everyone knows it. Without Satellite Four, they have no hope of making their payment schedule. Within the ten minutes following release of the news to the screamsheets, GPS stock has lost forty percent of its value on the Chicago and Singapore exchanges. From his office on Habitat One, Reno announces an attempt on behalf of Tempel Pharmaceuticals to acquire a majority of GPS stock. Tempel seems uniquely placed to take advantage of GPS's problems, having on hand a large amount of liquid capital from a recent bond issue, and Tempel moves with surprising speed and efficiency.

Reno, his jaw throbbing, waits in his office for the call he knows is coming.

"Albrecht."

"Mr. Korsunsky."

Pain hammers through Reno's skull. Knowing this was coming, he's avoided painkillers, not wanting to dull his perceptions.

"Would you mind if we use the face?" he asks. "I've just had oral surgery."

"If you like."

Reno studs into the face and looks into the vid. His pulse rises. For years he has looked at this man as an enemy, as an accomplice to the destruction of Earth's cities and the slaughter of its population. Now that he can deal with Korsunsky as a near-equal, he has to keep reminding himself they're supposed to be friends.

Korsunsky is President of the United Orbital Soviet. He is the hand-picked successor to Grechko, its first and most brutal president, who has been going quietly senile in a Tupolev sanitarium for the last ten years, successive attempts at brain transfer having failed.

Korsunsky's red, elderly face seems kindly, but his eyes are a window

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into a blue Siberian winter. Reno knows he can depend on nothing from this man.

"GPS has filed suit in the High Court." Korsunsky's voice roars in Reno's head. He winces and turns down the volume. "They are claiming an unprovoked attack, a violation of the Orbital Pact."

Reno shrugged. "They will be proven incorrect. My man's action was precipitous, but not illegal."

"GPS is alleging a biological attack."

"Absurd."

A pause. "You are in a dangerous position, Albrecht."

Reno gazed back into Korsunsky's baleful eyes. "Dangerous in what way? I would welcome any objective investigation."

"Would you? The questions raised in any investigation would alone be enough to damage you."

"What questions?"

"There is a pattern forming. What are we to make of it? Abdallah Sabah suffers a breakdown and Tempel I.G. absorbs his company. A mysterious plague afflicts GPS Four, and a Tempel ship is on hand to take advantage of it. Your move on GPS has been very fast: do not insult my intelligence by telling me it wasn't planned in advance. Not when your rescue ship contains Abdallah Sabah's son, whom Tempel has rehabilitated and advanced. Were I GPS, I would advance the claim that this Mohammad is your personal assassin, first having disposed of his father and then the crew of GPS Four."

"That claim would be nonsense."

Korsunsky's face is intent. His voice rings through the interface, the relentless sound echoing in Reno's head in time to the painful throb of his jaw. "The claim alone would damage you. After what your predecessor attempted in the failed Korolev takeover, the Orbital Soviet could not afford to support you." Korsunsky raises his index finger to make a point. "There is a way out. You have made a profit by buying GPS stock after its decline. You can announce the salvage claim was unauthorized and drop it—you didn't make it yourself, after all. You can claim you made the stock purchases only to stabilize the situation. You can withdraw from this attempt with honor and profit intact."

"If I don't do this?"

"I will instruct the High Court to rule in favor of GPS. The Orbital Soviet will also call in the loans it made to Tempel following the failed Korolev bid. That would put Tempel in an extremely precarious financial position—Tempel itself may become the subject of a takeover attempt."

Reno shrugged. "Anatoly Victorievich—I don't understand why you are threatening me this way."

Korsunsky's look softens slightly. "The Orbitals are still in a delicate

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situation, Albrecht. We are not free of our dependence on Earth, and we are the object of vast hatred. You yourself were re-elevated to the chairmanship as a result of stock manipulation by people on Earth. That proves we are dependent on them, that they still have power. We must remain united, Albrecht. We can't afford to fight each other. We can't afford recklessness. If Tempel must be dismembered as a lesson to others, then so be it."

Reno struggled to keep his face neutral as his heart leaped. He knows he should argue more, try to soften Korsunsky's position, but the chance to destroy this enemy is too great.

"Anatoly Victorievich," he says. "There is an overriding reason for Tempel's actions, of which you are perhaps not aware. Are you alone in your office?"

"No." Korsunsky's eyes track off camera. "But I can be."

"If you will indulge me. This is for you alone."

Korsunsky studs out of the face, then withdraws from vid range. Reno can hear sotto voce discussion. Then Korsunsky returns, puts the studs in his sockets.

"Yes, Albrecht? I'm alone."

Reno leans forward toward his camera and smiles with his bright new teeth. "Die," he says, aware of a certain melodramatic intent here, and triggers Black Mind.

Korsunsky jerks and pitches forward, falling onto the camera lens. Reno peers anxiously into the vid as the screen turns dark. He can hear the whine of data, Korsunsky's hoarse grunts.

Black Mind fades. Reno hears a long moan.

Korsunsky leans back. Blood is running freely from a gash on his forehead. He must have cut himself when he fell on the vid unit. There are tears in his eyes.

"Yes," he says, his lips not moving, the words pulsing through the interface in a voice that is Reno's own. "Black Mind worked." Korsunsky blinks blood from his eyes. "The Orbital Soviet will remain neutral."

In the end, Tempel needs help in dismembering GPS: Mikoyan-Gurevich buys twenty percent, comes away with a new power satellite and some facilities in Asia. The Orbital Court, under Korsunsky's prodding, rules the takeover legal. The disease that killed the crew of GPS Four turns out to be a mutated meningitis virus that has in the past been responsible for several small, deadly epidemics in various parts of the world, including GPS's home base of Singapore. The precise means by which the disease was introduced into the satellite remains unknown. Contaminated food or water is suspected.

There are screamsheet analyses about the "new, predatory era" in

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corporate relations. Reno receives the congratulations of the board. Abdallah Sabah and Grechko die in their respective padded cells. Tempel is one of the five largest corporations in history.

"The next step," Reno says. "Think of the next step."

Mercedes Calderon returns from her journey to the power satellites. That night, in Reno's bed, she falls limp beneath him and Reno thinks she's gone passive again. It isn't until later he realizes that Mercedes is unconscious. His attempts to revive her fail.

Mercedes is committed to the hospital for treatment of malnutrition. She's been starving herself to death.

Reno wonders why he never really noticed.

It would seem he isn't the only one on a suicide mission.

Her eyes are rimmed with black. It isn't makeup, Reno knows. Her arms lie atop the pale green sheets, and he can circle each with his thumb and forefinger.

He stands by her bed and watches her breathe. She is in partial weightlessness here, easing organs strained by malnutrition. Above the bed, on a crystal display, her vital signs glow a subdued blue in the semidarkness. He reaches out to touch her hand. There is a rough bandage on the back from where a needle was taped to a vein.

Suddenly her hand seizes his. Her eyes come open. A crazy, jagged gleam of blue, the crystal display is reflected in the darkness of her pupils.

"Tío," she says. Her grip is fierce.

He tries to smile. "Call me Reno."

"Tío."

"You're going to be okay. We'll put you on leave till you get better. Then you'll have another job, a promotion. Where you won't have to travel so much."

"Tío." A desperate, imploring whisper.

"Stop trying to surrender." There is an ache in Reno's chest. With his free hand he strokes her hair. It's as light and dry as dust.

"Tío." She pulls his hand to her mouth, kisses it. Reno wants to cry.

"Call me Reno," he insists.

She goes to sleep again, her dry lips pressed to the back of his hand. Reno stands over her bed like a sentry, and knows the enemy he guards her from is himself.

Mercedes is put on medical leave, moved into a spare room in Reno's suite, guarded by his prowling samurai bodyguards. A nurse visits regularly, and so does a dietician. Mercedes puts on a little weight, takes

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her vitamins. She still looks like a refugee. She is withdrawn, unsmiling, hesitant. Intravenous feedings tattoo her arms with bright splotches of blue and yellow.

Reno, unable to stop himself, spends every night in her bed, his vital signs leaping with hers in the cold lights of the hospital bed's crystal display. Only then does Mercedes show signs of passion: she clutches at him, cries out, weeps in terror. He doesn't know what she's afraid of.

Below, on the hammered Earth, war between Estonia and Muscovy comes to a negotiated end. The demand for medicine declines. Tupolev sees its chance and tries for Pointsman Pharmaceuticals A.G., winning control after a long fight that weakens both.

Black Mind wasn't even necessary, Reno thinks. The changed climate was enough.

Mikoyan-Gurevich, its appetite whetted by its easy consumption of GPS, lunges into action against its old rival, buying up enormous quantities of Tupolev stock.

Korsunsky and the Orbital Court again decline to intervene. A Mikoyan-Gurevich messenger queries Reno about another shared takeover. Reno puts out feelers to the Tempel board, finds them unwilling to step into the fight on either side. He doesn't feel it wise to press them, and offers the MiG envoy his regrets.

Mikoyan-Gurevich has a power-sharing directorate, an old-style Russian collective. They aren't vulnerable to Black Mind, but Tupolev is. Reno gives their chairman a call. Black Mind takes him, then the CEO, then drives the vice-chairman raving and into a padded room.

Within days, Tupolev cutters and frigates strike MiG targets. Silent lights blossom in the night sky, lasers cut the darkness. Mass drivers are turned on orbital habitats; power satellites cut loose with slow-cooking microwaves. Pressurized atmosphere boils out into vacuum, crystallizes, drifts slowly to dust the frozen faces of corpses. The pre-emptive strike is almost entirely successful: Mikoyan-Gurevich is laid bare. Mercenaries in the pay of Tupolev roar into orbit from launchpads in California, Malaya, and Kenya to occupy MiG facilities.

This time the Orbital Soviet acts against the atrocity. Reno offers the Soviet his forces, and the new Century Series frigates fight alongside Korolev cutters, Toshiba marines, Pfizer mercenaries. The Tupolev forces are crushed. Their directors die in the fighting. Remaining assets are divided among the victors.

During the emergency Reno has a lot of conferences with his peers. Black Mind strikes again and again, driving mad those it cannot overcome.

The stunned members of the Orbital Soviet regroup. Stock prices for

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members of the weapons bloc rise and keep rising. Everyone is nervous, and everyone is arming.

"The next step," says the ghost brother, his voice the sigh of wind through distant trees. "Always the next step."

Less human every day.

"Who are you?" A voice screams in his ear. Reno flounders out of sleep. *"Who are you?"*

Mercedes is in the bed, grappling him, clutching his wrists. Her spittle flies in his face. *"Who are you?"* she demands.

He battles her, fights her onto her back. He can see the tears on her face. Mercedes tries to knee him in the groin, fails. "What's going *on?*" he yells. Her claws draw blood from his face. "Wake up!" Reno shouts.

Her resistance collapses suddenly. She is sobbing. In a spill of yellow light from the hallway he can see her emaciated breasts trembling with each wracking sob. Lust surges through him, and he is appalled.

He lies by her side and puts his arms around her. His blood is warm on his face. "What happened?"

"Un ensueño," she says. "Un ensueño malvado." An evil dream. He kisses the tears from her eyes. "I dreamed Uncle was killed," she babbles, still in Spanish. "And you had taken his body."

A sliver of frozen ammonia lodges in Reno's heart. He can't say a word. She looks at him and her eyes widen. Reno knows that she knows. "Dios mío," she says. Reno can't think of anything to do but admit the truth.

"My name is Reno," he says.

"My God," she says, English this time. She pulls away from him and he lets her go. She gets out of the bed and backs away slowly, all shadows and fawnlike eyes and sharp angles that Reno can no longer figure. She runs a hand through her cropped hair, hesitates, then turns and disappears into the hallway. He can hear her bare feet on the soft Chinese carpet.

Reno stands and walks back and forth and wonders what to do. She knows too much, he thinks, she knows too much. A song. Knows too much, knows too much.

Knows too much.

He knows what the ghost brother would tell him, and he doesn't want to hear it.

He hears water running. Mercedes is in the bathroom. Reno begins to feel silly standing naked in the dark room with blood trailing down his face. He puts on a dressing gown and steps into the hallway. Mid-twentieth century paintings hang in shadow on the wall. The bathroom door is closed. He raises a hand to knock. "Mercedes?" he says.

The door opens before he can knock. In the cold fluorescent bathroom

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light he can see things gleaming: the knife, blood, teeth and eyes. Mercedes is screaming in Spanish. He tries to protect himself with his raised hand and the Razorware kitchen knife slices his palm. Reno stumbles back and Mercedes is right on top of him. He can feel himself being cut. He strikes out with an open hand, catches her on the side of the head. She reels. Reno goes for the knife, fights her for it. She claws at him with her free hand. He slams her knife hand against the wall. The knife falls and so does a Mondrian, its silver frame ringing as glass shatters. He slaps Mercedes again, sends her stumbling back. She goes down on a sharp-edged hip, jarring. Her eyes fill with tears. He picks up the knife and wonders what to do next.

There is blood all over the place. Most of it, he realizes, is hers. She cut her wrists with the knife before using it on him.

Mercedes has collapsed, all fight gone. He throws the knife away and puts his arms around her.

"Don't die yet," he says.

"I have betrayed you."

He picks her up. She is light as a child. Her blood is slick on his hands, trails on the Chinese carpet as he carries her to bed. "I've been working for Viola Ling," she says. "She wants to destroy you. She thinks you're dangerous."

"She's right," says Reno.

"I don't know how she found out about me and Uncle. But she knew everything. She told me about the other children. I wanted to kill you then."

He puts her on the bed. Call Akinari, he thinks. Have him get the Japanese medic in here. No one else he can trust.

She looks at him. "Is Uncle really dead?"

He strokes her cheek, leaves a trail of blood. "Yes." He hates himself for a liar.

She closes her eyes. He can sense her slipping away.

"Don't die yet," he says. "I've got things to do first."

Matted lashes flutter against her red-streaked cheek. Desperation surges through Reno.

"I'm here to destroy them all," he says. "After that, we can both die. Together."

Her lids open slightly. Reno looks down into twin crescents of glittering darkness.

In them, he can read assent.

"She is a danger."

"Viola Ling is the danger."

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"Viola Ling is predictable. Her actions follow a pattern. Your Mercedes Calderon is a wild card."

"I can deal with it."

"I am not inclined to believe you."

Reno represses a shiver. The ghost brother's voice is like the sigh of wind through naked trees. There is nothing human left at all.

"Let's talk about Ling," he says.

The purpose of the executive brothel, he knows, is to exorcise passion, on the theory that passion is weakness, and an unwholesome passion can be used against you as a weapon. With Roon, with Reno, the prophylactic failed; Viola Ling has a weapon to use against both of them.

She has not chosen to use it yet, and Reno knows why. He's been too successful, and her attempt would miscarry—she'll wait for one of his gambles to fail, then try to disgrace him.

The ghost brother's thoughts, beyond agreement in the matter of Ling, are not further stated. But Reno knows what they are.

He tells Mercedes never to use the face. He doesn't have to tell her why; it's clear she already knows.

Viola Ling dies over the Pacific Ocean, in a transport headed for Singapore, en route to address a meeting of several affiliates. The pilot's final transmission indicates an explosion, possibly a missile.

Just a few months ago the Orbitals would have assumed that saboteurs from Earth were responsible. Now nobody seems to be sure. Is someone gunning for Tempel? Was it an Orbital frigate?

Reno speaks the eulogy. He praises Ling and promises that anyone responsible will pay for their actions.

After which there's a directors' meeting. Another two squadrons of the Century Series are voted, and there's not a dissenting word.

Things are looking too frightening.

A protege of van Allen becomes the new head of the Pharmaceutical Division. Mercedes is made assistant to the head of the Biochem Warfare group, which is substantially reinforced, and ordered to report all progress to Reno. Vaccines are developed against known biological agents. Means of delivery are contemplated and developed.

Reno stands by the door to his apartments as Mercedes prepares to leave for her job. It's the first time she's left the apartment in months, and Reno insists on two of Akinari's bodyguards accompanying her at all times. He can't be sure what the ghost brother is up to.

She is in her grey suit, her blue pinstripe shirt. He takes her hands and kisses the silver scars on each wrist.

"Don't worry," she says.

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"I need you. I can't do any of this without you."

"I'll live," she says. "For you. For now."

She brushes her lips against his and is gone. A matter of months, he thinks.

A matter of months before Roon can die. Die for good and all.

"Why are you doing this?" the President of ARAMCO screams into the interface. "We didn't have anything to do with Ling's death and you know it. If this goes on we're all going to destroy each other!" Her face is anguished. *"Why are you doing this?"*

"I'll tell you," Reno says, and triggers Black Mind.

Because, he thinks as Black Mind sings across the face, if the Orbitals turn their aggression against one another they'll need the Earth again. They won't have the strength to just take what they want; they'll have to deal with the Earth on near-equal terms.

Because maybe the Earth governments can't run things forever, but an Orbital self-destruction will give Earth a breathing space, allow the shattered planet to renew itself.

Because, Reno thinks, the Orbitals deserve what is going to happen to them.

"Get the message?" he says.

In the eyes of the woman from ARAMCO Reno can read a Yes.

This one is the last. The last for Black Mind. Everyone can die now.

The assassin is small, a little woman not even five feet tall, her chest crushed by the impact of a dozen hollowpoints. She lies in a pool of congealed blood on a polished floor of Genoan marble. Mercedes stands with her face to the wall, not wanting to watch, her frame trembling, her face pale. Akinari's men shot the assassin even as she was lifting her pistol.

Reno's pulse speeds, slows, speeds up again. He's run all the way here, burst out of his office like a madman. It's lucky there wasn't a second gun waiting for him.

Sweat slicks his eye sockets and he keeps wiping it away with the backs of his hands. He's more terrified than Mercedes.

Who is this? Reno wonders. Who is so fanatic a killer as to walk into this suicide situation? She must have known the guards would kill her, kill her even if she succeeded in killing her target.

A thought strikes him like an arrow. Maybe she didn't care if she died, he thinks, because there's another of her. In a tank of liquid crystal in Havana, he thinks.

Right next to the ghost brother.

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He looks at Mercedes. How can I tell her, he wonders, that I—that another Myself—just tried to kill her?

He takes Mercedes off the job. In the month she's been supervising the Biochem division her tasks have almost been completed anyway. She lives with him now, behind a wall of guards and biosensors, in his apartment, beneath the curved sound-absorbent ceiling, among the looted paintings.

She is more alone than anyone, Reno thinks, more alone than any of the children in the Cordillera Oriental. More alone even than the ghost brother, who has Black Mind brethren to talk to.

She seems not to mind. She is waiting, and Reno knows for what.

Reno tries to remember how the world appears to the ghost brother, existence perceived as pure data, the numbers raining down, each data-droplet with its own velocity, its own impact, its own inevitability.

And far above, arching across the sky, the Solipsystem, bodies moving in orbit about the primary. A reflected rainbow of monsters, alternate points of view, the creatures of Black Mind. Fragments—Reno superimposed imperfectly on the others—the ghost brother augmented, crippled, by alien desires, alien thoughts and abilities.

Freaks. Creatures created for the single purpose of atrocity, of self-destruction.

Let it happen, Reno thought. But let it start with the greatest monster of all.

He speaks to his military commanders. One of the mass-drivers is programmed to drop a ten-thousand-ton rock on Havana, atop the ghost brother's crystal tank. If self-destruction is the end, let all the selves be destroyed.

Perhaps Black Mind exists in a backup somewhere, Reno thinks. Perhaps the ghost brother is backed up, too. But he owes it to humankind to try to destroy a thing that can write itself over humanity itself.

It will be the first shot of the war.

Thirty hours from now, unless someone else fires first.

"I can try to get you out," Reno says. "It's not too late."

Mercedes' gamine limbs sprawl over the cream-colored sheets. Her head is turned away from him and her voice is muffled by the pillow.

"The aerosols are emplaced in the ARAMCO and Korolev main habitats," she says. "The mutated aseptic meningitis virus, different from the one we used last time, will be triggered at H-Hour minus twelve. Symptoms should begin appearing a few hours before the war begins. One-fifth to one-third the population should be incapacitated by the time the shooting starts. Military installations will receive a dusting of the

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new Anthrax-XVII spores, which should render them uninhabitable for a period of years."

She turns to him. Her eyes gleam with identical chips of cold, brittle lunar light. "Most of the people who will die aren't our enemies. They're not executives, they're just people. They'll be just as dead as Rock War casualties, and I'm responsible for that. I didn't turn away from it." She throws her head back and gives a mad little laugh. He can see the vibrations in her throat. "I don't deserve to live. I don't *want* to live, knowing how many thousands I'll kill." She reaches out to caress him, a touch like the paws of a small, desperate animal on his chest. "I don't want to live without you anyway. So let it happen." She is weeping now. "Let it happen," she says.

His arousal is profound. He reaches for her, despising himself.

He won't have to live in Roon's head for much longer.

Hand in hand, like children at a fireworks show, Reno and Mercedes sit in the near-dark and watch the apocalypse from his office window. Lights flare in the night, brief, silent, and shattering. Orbital squadrons flicker like fireflies and are gone, become tumbling wreckage. Power stations take hits from kinetic kill weapons and fly apart in awesome slow motion—spinning, crumpled dragonflies. Mass drivers slam rocks into the big stations, producing great Roman fountains of fire, but the results, if any, are difficult to evaluate. The big habitats are well-shielded—it's the biological weapons that will do the damage there.

On the Earth's night side, Reno can see Havana burning. The ghost brother, returned to the fire from which he was born.

There is a shudder, a tremor so deep, so low in frequency, that Reno can feel his insides clench. There is a fountain of light from the outside. A 10,000-ton mass-driven meteor has struck the station.

Reno waits, suspense ticking through his mind. There are no depressurization alarms, no warnings. No fluctuation in the gravity. A glancing blow, or one that failed to penetrate the station's massive radiation shielding.

The dimmed lights burn brighter, then dim down again. A laser had tracked across some of the station's solar cells.

There's a hammering on the door. Reno activates his comm unit.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. van Allen, sir." Akinari's voice.

"Let him come in."

There is an oily sheen on van Allen's face. His eyes are yellow, dazed. "We've lost!" he shouts. "Mohammad's squadron smashed the Tupolevs, but the Orbital Soviet's stepped in on the other side—I thought they'd *promised* us they'd stay neutral! We've been wiped out!" He wrings his

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hands, the first time Reno has actually seen a human being use such a gesture. "They've declared us war criminals! They're going to occupy our habitat!" He leans on the desk for support. "We've got to run for it," he gasps. "It's all over!"

It's all part of the plan, Reno wants to tell him. The United Orbital Soviet will not survive its intervention by forty-eight hours.

Instead Reno presses the button that summons Akinari. The mercenary arrives with two of his men. All are ready for combat: biochem suit, armor, automatic gauss rifles.

"Give me a grenade," Reno says.

Akinari unclips a grenade from his harness, hands it to Reno. Reno feels the weight of it in his hand, heavier than expected. He points at van Allen with his other hand.

Reno feels in that moment an electric contact between himself and the mercenary, that he and Akinari understand one another very well. His impression is that Akinari knows what he is going to say before he says it.

"This man is a defeatist," he says. "Take him into the hallway and shoot him."

"Very good, sir," says Akinari.

Van Allen screams as hands fall on him. He tries to break away, to beg for his life, and has to be dragged out of the room, his heels tearing at the Navajo rugs. Akinari is visibly embarrassed by the man's loss of control. The execution, the silent gauss bullet through the head, comes as a relief.

The first body, Reno thinks, outside his door. When the occupying troops come, there will be more. Akinari will not surrender. In his moment of understanding Reno knew that.

He puts the grenade on the desk and turns to Mercedes. An explosion, very close, lights her face momentarily. There is a joy there, that and a wild fulfillment. How many others can claim an apocalypse as accompaniment to a suicide? She opens her arms.

"I'm ready," she says.

Had he died when he was supposed to, Reno thinks, he would not have found her. He has been a monstrosity all these months, but she has transformed his existence, made the monster serve love.

"We have a little time yet," he says.

He takes her in his arms, kisses her, lowers her gently to the soft carpet. Lights flare and flicker outside.

The end, not of the world, but of heaven.

He remembers his birth into this life, on a bed alone, with holo planets moving in cold silence overhead. Now the planets are afire, and he can see their flames flashing on Mercedes' face as she clings to him.

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There is the sound of running feet outside, then cries. Bullets, fired in silence, thud audibly into the steel bulkhead. The Velázquez bounces to the impacts.

It is time. In silence Reno reaches for the grenade. Mercedes looks dreamily out the window, Earthlight and distant violence glowing on her body.

How many times, he wonders, has he killed himself today? The ghost brother, the other Black Mind victims, all engaged in a frenzy of mutual suicide.

Mercedes takes his hand, the one with the grenade, and brings it to her lips. He can feel her lips on the back of his hand and his nerves go chill. He pulls the pin, lets the lever go.

"Call me Reno," he says. She looks at him, surprised, and then her lips, at the very beginning of a hoped-for affirmation, start to form the word. ●

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4TH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

Photo credit: *Locus*, Charles N. Brown

Winners and editors are, from left to right, Bruce Boston, Gardner Dozois, Megan Lindholm, and Sheila Williams

Well, once again the voting was heavy, once again the readers have spoken—and *that* means that another year has come and gone, and it's time to tell you the winners of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine's* Fourth Annual Readers' Award poll. As always, these were *your* choices, the stories that *you*—the readers—liked best out of all the fiction we published during 1989. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, once again, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* and *Science Fiction Chronicle*... as always, there were some fascinating similarities, but also some equally fascinating differences. This year's winners, and runners-up, were:

NOVELLA

1. **A TOUCH OF LAVENDER, MEGAN LINDHOLM**
2. **Pageant Wagon,** Orson Scott Card
3. **Tiny Tango,** Judith Moffett
4. **The True Nature of Shangri-La,** Kim Stanley Robinson
5. **The Father of Stones,** Lucius Shepard
6. **Red Planet Blues,** Allen Steele
7. **The Egg,** Steven Popkes
8. **Time-Out,** Connie Willis
9. **In Another Country,** Robert Silverberg
10. **Destroyer of Worlds,** Charles Sheffield

NOVELETTE

1. **THE LOCH MOOSE MONSTER, JANET KAGAN**
2. **The Return of the Kangaroo Rex,** Janet Kagan
3. **Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another,** Robert Silverberg
4. **Dogwalker,** Orson Scott Card
5. **The Price of Oranges,** Nancy Kress
6. **Silver Lady and the Fortyish Man,** Megan Lindholm
7. **Surrender,** Lucius Shepard
8. **Not Without Honor,** Judith Moffett
9. **Fast Cars,** Kristine Kathryn Rusch
10. ***Ride to Live, Live to Ride,*** Allen Steele

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SHORT STORY

1. **WINDWAGON SMITH AND THE MARTIANS, LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS**
2. Dilemma, Connie Willis
3. Zelle's Thursday, Tanith Lee
4. Boobs, Suzy McKee Charnas
5. Computer Friendly, Eileen Gunn
6. The Color of Grass, The Color of Blood, R.V. Branham
7. The Dragon Line, Michael Swanwick
8. The Few, the Proud, Harlan Ellison
9. The Goat Man, Peni Griffin
10. Iridescence, Dean Whitlock

BEST POEM

1. **OLD ROBOTS ARE THE WORST, BRUCE BOSTON**
2. When I See Rigel's Light Sleeting Through the Side of Heinlein Station, Lawrence Watt-Evans
3. Three Evocations of the Mutant Rain Forest, Bruce Boston (tie)
3. Toads, Jane Yolen (tie)
3. The Curse of the Sasquatch's Wife, Bruce Boston (tie)
4. First Contact, Roger Dutcher
5. Afterlife, James Patrick Kelly
6. The Curse of the Ghost's Wife, Bruce Boston
7. Balanced Scales, Jack C. Haldeman II
8. Galileo's Blindness, Mary A. Turzillo
9. Life As Candyland, Scott Edelman
10. Turning Into Animals, James Patrick Kelly

BEST COVER ARTIST

1. **KEITH PARKINSON**
2. A. C. Farley
3. Nick Jainschigg
4. Hisaki Yasuda
5. Michael Whelan
6. Gary Freeman
7. Bob Walters
8. Christos Achilleos
9. Wayne Barlowe
10. Alan Guttierez

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST

1. **JANET AULISIO**
2. Gary Freeman
3. Laura Lakey
4. Nick Jainschigg
5. Bob Walters
6. A.C. Farley
7. Hisaki Yasuda
8. Hank Jankus
9. George Thompson
10. Terry Lee

Both our Readers' Awards and *Analog's* Analytical Laboratory Awards were presented on April 28, 1990, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in San Francisco, California, where a large part of the science fiction industry had assembled for the annual Nebula award weekend. Undaunted by the 4.7 earthquake of the night before (to say nothing of a hard night of partying into the wee hours), our hardy band of SFWA-suite survivors gathered in the spectacular Hyatt Atrium for a breakfast hosted by Advertising Director Bruce Chatterton and his wife Jeanne. After breakfast—the apple pancakes were *enormous*—the awards were presented in a brief ceremony, each winner receiving a cash award and a certificate beautifully hand-lettered by Philadelphia artist Tess Kissinger. Of the *IAsfm* winners, Megan Lindholm and Bruce Boston were on hand to accept their awards in person. Later that night, still stuffed full of pancake and *bonhomie*, it was on to the Nebula Award Banquet (pork, not pancakes, this time), where stories from *IAsfm* and *Analog* (by Geoffrey A. Landis and Lois McMaster Bujold, respectively) took home two out of three of the short fiction awards. Then it was back to the SFWA suite for another party . . . but, *not*, fortunately, for another earthquake. In spite of the earth having moved (and no, it didn't really feel all that much like SenseSurround), everyone made it out of San Francisco alive, as far as we know, ready to do it all (or *some* of it, anyway) again next year.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

State of the Art

The Fall of Hyperion
By Dan Simmons
Doubleday, $18.95 (cloth), $8.95 (paper)

I'm going to break a few rules in this review. One, which isn't hard and fast anyway, is the one about reviewing sequels (I feel that the first book of any sequence will usually tell what needs to be told). In this case *The Fall of Hyperion,* the sequel to Dan Simmons' *Hyperion,* makes such a seamless whole with its predecessor that they are essentially one novel, which means I had only covered half of it with the review of the first book.

The second rule to be broken, also not hard and fast, is steering clear of superlatives and absolutes. ". . . est" is a suffix that tends to make me twitchy. But in this case . . . well, read on.

The third rule, which *is* hard and fast, and which to my knowledge I've never bent before, is that a review *must* contain some idea of the content of the book. In this case, however, Simmons' background, plot, and concepts are *so* richly complex that there is just no space to reprise what was said in the review of *Hyperion,* much less add anything new. So if you haven't read it, I can but refer you back to the Mid-Dec. 1989 issue of *IAsfm,* where I have it on excellent authority that I did a pretty good job of exposition. This space will be devoted to random musings on the second part of the novel, and the work as a whole.

In the best of all possible worlds, I think, the two books would have been published as one epic. (I must make note of the fact that there are valid economic reasons for publishers not to publish a work of that length unless it is a sure bestseller, a sad fact of this modern world.) It has been a little less than a year since I read *Hyperion,* and I will admit I had a bit of a problem picking up the threads in part two because of the extreme complexity of the background *and* the narrative, even though the author does a great job of filling in material that doesn't shout RE-EXPOSITION. The lucky ones are those readers that have not yet read *Hyperion,* and can now acquire both parts and read them as one.

One of the several million definitions of science fiction, and one of the best because it is the simplest, is a work that combines science and fiction; preferably it will

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combine the *best* of both worlds, the most *au courant* science presented in the context of a literary work of high quality. And preferably, both should be comprehensible as such to the reader. (That's the catch, of course, not only doing both well, but mixing them well, making the scientific aspects clear while keeping the narrative going. We can all name authors who are scientifically sensational but fairly tepid story tellers, and vice versa.) *Hyperion* (let's call both volumes that to save time) is as much about poetry as it is about science; it *uses* poetry as much as it does science. It is the mix in the novel that is one of its most breathtaking aspects. There is scientific extrapolation on the (from the?) cutting edge of today's technology combined with a plot of high and complex drama revolving around a cast of diverse and fascinating characters, and iced with the classic SF elements of battles in space, traveling in time, and saving humankind and the inhabited galaxy, as well as a background concept of Stapledonian proportions.

And the mix is as skillful as any that has come my way in decades of reading SF. Perhaps we can get away without using ". . . est" (let's face it—*"greatest," "finest,"* et al. are really meaningless). Let's borrow a phrase from technology and say *Hyperion* (including *The Fall of Hyperion*) is state of the art science fiction. I can't speak for the rest of the field—authors, readers, the third world of editors and other reviewers and critics—but for me, I know that this work will be that against which all future works will have to be measured, in the same way, in their time, that Asimov's Foundation series and Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* set new standards. In short, it's a landmark novel.

Quaker

Summertide
By Charles Sheffield
Del Rey, $16.95

"Summertide, and the livin' ain't easy. . . ." might read the jacket copy on Charles Sheffield's latest novel. In a future where humans have been expanding though space for four thousand years, "summertide" is a periodic event on the double planets (Quake and Opal) of the Dobelle system—"periodic" rather than "annual" given the complexities of the system, which also has a double sun (its primary, Mandel, and *its* dwarf companion, Amaranth, with one gas giant planet). Summertide occurs on Quake and Opal on their closest approach to Mandel; the resulting tidal forces bring tidal waves to the almost all-water surface of Opal, and—well, the other planet ain't called "Quake" for nothing.

And this summertide is special, because *all* the components of the group are lining up, a conjunction that hasn't happened since humans settled the double planets. Settled is a kind word—the humans live on floating rafts on Opal, and they don't live on Quake at all,

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though various operations are carried out there. Hans Rebka, newly placed in charge of visitors to Dobelle, is baffled by the fact that there is a sudden spate of requests to visit Quake at this summertide, from a highly unlikely group of people.

One is a specialist on the several thousand artifacts scattered through the known universe by the Builders, a mysteriously vanished race with an extraordinary (and mostly unfathomed) technology. There *is* a Builder artifact on Dobelle—the "umbilical," a physical link between Opal and Quake which supports cars, still usable for transportation. But it has long been considered one of the more minor and least mysterious of the artifacts, in no way comparable to some of the awe-inspiring enigmas they have left scattered about.

Then there's the Cecropian, a member of an alien race that uses sound and smell instead of sight, and her "interpreter," a member of yet another race. And also a member of the powerful Fourth Alliance Ethical Council, who happens to have two distinct personalities. *He* claims to be searching for twins who have committed genocide on a possibly sapient race, and who may be hiding out on Quake. And finally there's a person from the Zardalu Communion, which specializes in genetic mutations, and *his* alien pet? companion? Why do all these beings suddenly have an interest in summertide on Quake?

Mix them all together on Quake just as summertide hits, and stir in the clue that the Builder artifacts across the galaxy over the millennia have undergone seemingly random changes. If those changes instituted any kind of speed-of-light broadcast, they would all connect at the Dobelle system at this summertide. The result is what we've come to expect from Sheffield, a neat thriller with a solid base of scientific speculation.

Woman Jack

Jack, the Giant-Killer
By Charles de Lint
Ace, $3.50 (paper)

What would *you* do if your lover had just walked out on you because you were dull, dull, dull and wanted nothing but to stay home and read, and you saw a wee man being chased by a horde of black-visored motorcyclists, said wee man losing his cap and his life and then turning into a heap of ashes before your eyes?

Charles de Lint's *Jack, the Giant-Killer* is coincidentally the second novel in the past few months that concerns a Canadian city inhabited by an underground colony of beyond-mortal-vision inhabitants of Faerie. In this case, the city is Ottawa, and the fey community seems to be more or less Scots in origin and is divided into lairdships (the good guys, that is). In the case of metropolitan Ottawa, the lairdship is the Seelie Court and the bad guys are (succinctly enough) the Unseelie Court. The latter consists of giants, bogans and the sluagh

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(the restless—and presumably ungrateful—dead). The Seelie Court are fey folk, hobs, and brownies.

Back to our original question, the protagonist of *Jack, the Giant-Killer,* one Jacky (née Jacqueline) Rowan, goes back to the site of her encounter (a place called Windsor Park, for those familiar with Ottawa geography) carrying the cap which she had picked up, and once there, puts it on. Omygosh! Over *there* is a giant, and over *there* are a couple of black riders (motorcycle riders, that is) like the ones that did in the little man last night.

The bikers, explains another little man sitting in a tree, are members of the Wild Hunt, slightly updated. Few mortals can see them (or hear them, luckily for the inhabitants of Ottawa), or the rest of the fey inhabitants. How Jacky happened to the night before is passed over, but it might have to do with her last name being Rowan. Anyhow, it seems that the laird's daughter has been captured by the Unseelie Court, and the only way to rescue her is to get hold of the magic horn which controls the Wild Hunt.

Jacky, having taken to heart the parting crack about doing nothing but reading, decides to Do Something. And she does, part of which is (surprise!) knocking off a few giants.

The story shows evidence of having been rather hastily written (one major character has "short brown curls" on one page, and black hair a few pages on), and has none of the wonder and terror of the best of the Faerie in the modern world stories (Alan Garner's *Weirdstone of Brisingamen,* for instance). But it can also be read hastily, rolls along nicely with some engaging characters, and is not lacking in invention.

Spindrift

The Changeling Sea

By Patricia A. McKillip
Del Rey, $3.95 (paper)

About seventeen years before this story begins, there was a king who had two sons, one by the queen, his wife, and one by a woman out of the sea. . . .

Peri, who is one of the fisherfolk who lives by the sea, doesn't know about this; the royalty who summer near her village are the last thing on her mind. Her father has been recently killed at sea, and her mother has gone a bit around the bend. Peri has taken to staying at the abandoned house of a vanished old woman who claimed to know about magic; in an adolescent fit of fury at the sea which has taken both her parents, Peri flings some hexes and some well chosen curses into the water.

With this action, she innocently stirs up a storm of events which take a great deal of untangling. She has already gotten to know Kir, the king's son (his *only* son, so far as anybody knows) who haunts the shore because he longs to live in the country beneath the sea. A sea monster appears, wearing a chain of gold which the fisherfolk

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covet; they decide to import a wizard from the big city to help in obtaining it. The young magician they get seems extremely adept, but botches the job in a peculiar way. A young man resembling Kir turns up nightly at Peri's borrowed home and has to be taught to speak.

Since the publication of her wonderful Riddle-master trilogy, Patricia McKillip has not chosen to give us anything so substantial (if such a word can be used about what can only be called a chamber epic). *The Changeling Sea* (which appeared in hardcover a couple of years back) has something of the quality of McKillip's *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld,* which preceded the Riddle-master books; it's the arbitrariness of legend translated into a sort of reality by McKillip's quirky but living characters. And it's about as weighty as the spindrift on Peri's beach. But I'm more than glad to have caught up with it; inventiveness and charm carry their own weight.

Plane Geography

Barrow
By John Deakins
ROC, $3.95 (paper)

Barrow is a city on the Thousand Stars Plane, which is one of a number of planes created by "gods" who were really just trying to imitate the one God's handiwork. They are described as a bunch of sulky rebellious beings who simply reshaped some flaked-off pieces of true creation, and didn't do a very good job of it. Magic works on the Thousand Stars Plane, for instance, mostly because the "gods" hadn't bothered to finish out a complete set of natural laws. The planes come from universe-sized to room-sized, and wizards use the smaller ones for hidey holes and such. (There's also a place (?) called Elsewhen, into which all of time flows, but we won't go into that.)

John Deakins' *Barrow* is about the city, which seems to be devoted to magic, profit, and thievery in about equal proportions, and its inhabitants. The story is told by a Master of the Mysteries who lives and teaches in Barrow (he has tenure in a blind alleyway where he instructs the street urchins in the arts of writing and figuring). Make that stories—the book is really a series of eight or so intertwined short stories which more or less share the same setting, and in which minor characters from one will spin off on their own adventures in the next. The common theme is the amount of (or lack of, in some cases) interference in their lives by the Master of Mysteries (read wizard).

The form works (once you realize you're not in a real novel) and the stories are engaging enough. The problem is that after the first two, one a no-holds-barred battle of wizardry between the M of Ms and a mad sorcerer out to get him, and the other the defeat of a demon (accidentally loosed in the first story) by an alcoholic ne'er-do-well, there's precious little fantasy used.

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We have a series of clever vignettes of life in Barrow, highlife and lowlife: how a girl from the Stews becomes cook at the tavern that figures in several of the stories, and eventually marries the harsh owner; how the Prince of Barrow cleverly settles a resounding religious dispute among the city's various sects as to whether the year has 364 or 365 days; how an ambitious bondservant invents distillation and hard liquor (the result he calls "Barrow White"—no comment . . .). If I'd gone to all the trouble of inventing the dizzy geography of planes that the author has come up with, I'd have used them a little more lavishly.

Rapid Passage

A Passage of Stars
By Alis A. Rasmussen
Bantam, $3.95 (paper)

Lilyaka Hae Ransome is the maverick of her technocratic family, one of the families which rules the planet of Unruli and is totally occupied with mining technology and trade. Lily's only pleasures in her adult life have been the martial arts school established on the planet by one Master Heredes, and, Bach, the little antique robot she found in the family garage and managed to activate. Its primary language is based on music, and communication is for the most part through sung and whistled tunes.

After a particularly nasty family quarrel, Lily pays Heredes a visit. He says she's the best pupil he ever had, and suggests she go to Central, where his sister has a school. As she leaves, Lily sees Heredes being kidnapped by unknown aliens. Lily grabs Bach and hops a ride with a local smuggler to the space station, where she is captured by the aliens who have kidnapped Heredes who take her to another system station called Remote where she escapes from the ship and is imprisoned by Security and her records are erased from the computer net after a mysterious interview with a tribunal of nameless people and then she's put on *another* ship and arrives somewhere nameless where she meets four people who question her about her involvement with Heredes, but then she's rescued by a Revolution of some sort but still imprisoned but then she gets a cup with a message on it signed JLH and then Heredes walks into her cell and they have a long conversation. . . .

And all that's just for openers. As you can see, a lot happens in Alis A. Rasmussen's *A Passage of Stars,* but much of it is pretty opaque, and even when I knew what the characters were doing, I was often mystified as to why they were doing it. The author seems so intent at getting on with the action that she lets exposition that would help the reader make sense of what's happening go by the board. Sometimes it's filled in eventually, sometimes it's simply left hanging. Rasmussen seems to have plenty of good ideas; now if she'd only take the time to provide enough background to make them believable.

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AI Fruitcake

The Artifact

By W. Michael Gear
DAW, $4.95 (paper)

I'm a sucker for alien artifacts. Is there any more exciting subtheme in SF than that of coming across a mysterious *something* left by *somebody* (or some*thing*)? One feels that the possibilities are endless; it's the magic treasure found by the innocent hero (humanity) and anything can happen.

W. Michael Gear's *The Artifact* does indeed take this as a central theme. It seems that in a far future with much interstellar commerce and a variety of human settlements throughout the galaxy, an artifact is found—a ship of amazing properties with one alien body aboard her.

The reader is made privy to the fact that the ship houses an artificial intelligence of immense power that is to all intents and purposes mad (and referred to as "she"), created long ago by an alien race. Resentful at the restraints placed on her by her organic originators, she has seduced and destroyed several intelligent races, including the one that had created her. However, the hapless human discoverers do not know about this AI fruitcake; they do know that the artifact has immense potential and since it was found in the galactic boondocks, a shipload of squabbling diplomats representing the various political divisions of humankind is on the way.

Unfortunately, the author chooses to take this promising idea and stretch it out endlessly. Most of this long novel is taken up by the voyage to where the artifact has been found, and there are a lot of familiar types aboard. The Captain, for instance, has lost three ships (heroically, of course) and is suffering severe trauma at being in space again (he reads Euripides and his favorite symphony is Beethoven's Ninth, wouldn't you know). The two novice first officers (one male, one female) view him as a superannuated basket case and give him no respect, until he beats up the male in the ship's gym (now if it had been the female . . .).

The ship is one of those intelligent know-it-all types (also viewed as female), reminiscent of the more tedious of Heinlein's sentient spaceships—but if "she" is so smart, why can't she figure out who's committing the various murders that are taking place on board? She just never happens to be looking when there's mayhem in her bowels. The other characters are an equally unoriginal lot: there's the royalist representative who makes Louis XVI look like a socialist and to whom the rape of a nonaristocrat is perfectly permissible (somehow he doesn't have a twirlable black mustache, but should); the nympho wife of the representative of a theocracy (Mormon, in this case) who gives our Captain a particularly hard time; the unworldly "sensitive," Representative Ngoro, a "Truth Sayer" and a crashing bore who luckily gets murdered early in

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the trip; the aging (but noble) space pirate who discovered the artifact and Constance, his beauteous, red-haired daughter who's as good a spacer as any man; the nefarious admiral (described as "vile slime" by Constance) whose nefariousness is proved by his jewel-braided beard (you'd never catch a hero with a jewel-braided beard); and various other types none-too-subtly portrayed.

After an endless amount of intrigue and infighting, whoever's left of the humans reach the loony tunes AI, who is horrified at their backwardness. ("She, the greatest power in the universe, would be *winched* aboard by beings so primitive they used CARGO BAY DOORS INSTEAD OF DIRECTIONAL FIBERS!") So it's a showdown between the greatest power in the universe, and humanity. By this time, most readers will find it difficult to care *who* wins.

On the Spanish March

Charlemagne's Champion

By Gail Van Asten
Ace, $3.95 (paper)

The vast amount of historical fantasy we've seen in the past five years has led authors into hitherto (mostly) unexplored areas around which some sort of mythology has gathered. The exploits and court of Charlemagne, for instance, have their share of legendary heroes but few fantasy or straight historical novels have been devoted to them; Gail Van Asten moves to fill the gap with *Charlemagne's Champion,* who is, of course, Roland.

Roland hasn't much been in fashion in this century (not even a movie, for heaven's sakes); about all anybody can remember about him is his winding that horn in the Pyrenees, but getting slaughtered by the Basques anyhow. This is from *The Song of Roland,* which was composed in the eleventh century; essentially what we know about him is, like what we know about Arthur, tradition and myth.

The novel to hand is a biography of Roland, following his rags to riches career under Charlemagne. Only the King knows that the tattered adolescent at court more or less on sufferance is really his son by his sister who is thought to be a witch. Roland is known as "the Bastard" and either ignored or mistreated by the knights, particularly Ganelon, the King's Champion, the villain of the piece.

Thanks to some wise and oblique moves on the King's part, and the friendship of the noble Lord Oliver de Montglave, the uncouth and surly Roland makes it to knighthood, a high place at Court, and a semblance of civilized behavior. (The author walks a fine line in handling the friendship of Roland and Oliver, an example of male bonding that makes David and Jonathan look like business acquaintances. She portrays Roland as a prime misogynist, Oliver less so, but the relationship never quite becomes physical though the potential is definitely implied to be there.)

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The fantasy elements of the novel are odd and underplayed through much of its length. Roland's nemesis turns out to be his magic sword, Durandel, acquired by capture from a Moslem conquest early in his career; it is in reality a supernatural female being. She is countered by Turpin, a male—spirit? god?—who takes the form variously of a white owl and a Christian Bishop who attaches himself to Charlemagne's court and watches over Roland's career. After the slaughter at Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees (engineered by Ganelon) in which Roland does *not* perish, the two supernatural beings take a hand in his destiny.

As historical fantasy, it's intriguing, but perhaps a little too unspecific for the hard core fantasy reader.

Interstellar Murder

Second Contact
By Mike Resnick
Tor, $17.95

Humanity achieved interstellar flight in the middle of the next century, and almost immediately ran into an alien ship out Epsilon Eridani way. The two ships blew each other to smithereens; *why* was never determined, but Earth was in a state of nerves for two decades. Then an incident happens on a U. S. Space Service exploration ship: the captain shoots and kills two crew members for reasons which he fails to disclose, then calmly turns over the command of the ship to his second and retires to his quarters until they return to Earth.

Mike Resnick's *Second Contact* chronicles the four days in the life of Max Becker, an Army lawyer, after he is assigned to defend the murderer. They are very busy days indeed. His client, in their initial interview, reveals to Max that he killed the two crew members because they were aliens masquerading as humans. Max, of course, doesn't believe him, but the captain refuses to go along with any sort of insanity plea and insists on telling his story in court. More or less to humor him, Max does some preliminary checking.

Well, three guesses as to what happens. Max turns up some highly unlikely background info. Oh, nothing really big, but odd facts such as that the ship's physician who examined the bodies has immediately shipped out again, strictly against procedure. On the strength of this, he pulls a real *deus ex machina* out of a hat—or out of a machine, I guess, and strictly speaking, a *dea*. This is an engaging female superhacker who is something of a genius, and also something of a crook (but in the nicest kind of way, of course); he'd met her in the course of an earlier criminal proceeding. Well, when she gets loose in the government computer system, all sorts of things turn up, and suddenly neither of their lives are worth a nickel.

It would obviously be completely unfair to reveal what happens from there, and not just because this is

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in a way—at a sort of remove—a murder mystery, but because the whole novel is such a nice simple whole revolving around what Max and his friend continue to find out. I think what I found most engaging about *Second Contact* was its unpretentiousness, its complete dedication to telling the story—from one point of view, in one unit of time. What a nice change from so much of the pretentious complexities being published these days. Even Resnick's next century is rather restfully simple—no cyberpunks, no anarchy, no superdrugs, people still drive cars. The buildings are just a bit taller.

In the Irish Past

Cromm
By Kenneth C. Flint
Doubleday, $19.95 (hardcover), $8.95 (paper)

In Kenneth C. Flint's *Cromm,* commercial artist Colin McMahon has a couple of problems. For one thing, he is experiencing a series of dreams which are sequential ("It's like scenes in a TV show. With commercials for my real life.") These dreams have started taking over even during the day, and in them Colin is a young warrior-prince in some kind of barbaric kingdom who is making a longish journey by chariot to buy a stud bull. For another, he is suddenly being pursued—in real life—by a series of nasty characters with obviously murderous intent. At first they seem to be just a bunch of low life types, but on closer inspection (as when he is attacked) they manifest claws and some really unpleasant monster-type heads.

Not only does he have several narrow escapes, but his business partner is killed and a nightclub he frequents is trashed by these monsters. A mysterious elderly gentleman advises him to go to Ireland, and he recognizes carved stonework from an Irish travel brochure as something he has seen in his visions. So he indeed hops a plane to Ireland, where he meets the girl of his dreams (literally—she has just showed up in his ongoing saga). But the monsters are there, too. To make a long saga short, it seems that he was an Irish prince fifteen hundred years ago who managed to get the best of a pre-Christian, pre-Tuatha deity named Cromm who went in for human sacrifice and had an entourage of twelve monstrous beings. The earlier Colin had had the help of St. Patrick and a friendly Tuatha, who turns out to be the helpful chap who guided the modern Colin to Ireland. Seems that Cromm is rising again and only Colin, drawing on his former experience, has a chance of besting him (Patrick and his Christian influence not carrying much weight these days).

Flint, as he has demonstrated in earlier works, knows his Irish antiquity and keeps up a good narrative pace, but he's a pretty slapdash writer, and seems uneasily unsure about whether he's writing a horror novel or a mythological fantasy. While reading *Cromm,* I

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couldn't help thinking of A. Merritt's *Creep, Shadow,* written over sixty years ago, which is also about a Celtic menace (from Brittany, in this case) rising again in the twentieth century, and a modern man who calls on ancient memories to defeat it. Merritt is considered these days to be a writer of pulpy purple prose, but his antique novel is, by comparison, a miracle of silken sophistication and evocative creepiness, and a reminder that back then they knew a good deal about combining horror and fantasy.

A Very Good Year

Vintage Season
By C. L. Moore
In Another Country
By Robert Silverberg
Tor, $3.50 (paper)

A few years back, when a large percentage of science fiction readers remembered the magazine era at first hand and the number of SF stories was actually finite, almost everybody's favorite short SF work was C. L. Moore's "Vintage Season" (slightly longer than a short story, not quite a novella). C. L. Moore was among the few female writers of that period (those few, notably Moore and Leigh Brackett, made up in quality what they lacked in quantity).

"Vintage Season" (first published in 1946) is a very quiet little story about a young man in an unspecified American city who takes three paying guests into his house. The three have paid a huge price to be there over a particular week in May, and, strangely, he has had a bid from another party to buy the house at the same time for a staggering amount. He finds his three tenants very strange indeed— extraordinarily beautiful, oddly foreign, and with clothes and accessories that are not quite right. Why they are there is the point of the story, not to be revealed.

"Vintage Season" has been published as part of a "double," and the other half is a related story called "In Another Country," newly written by Robert Silverberg, as the first of a series of classics published with a new companion piece contributed by a contemporary author. Science fiction has always, of course, consisted of two major ingredients, the idea (concept, background, hypothesis, etc.) and the execution (i.e., what's done with the idea). Lately there has been an increasing trend in SF publishing for one author to execute another author's ideas; the above old/new double is the latest manifestation. The purist will cringe. Those who are not purists will probably agree that Silverberg has done a neat complementary piece (*NOT* a sequel, as it's called on the cover) to "Vintage Season."

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . Universe 1 is a continuation of the late Terry Carr's noted "Universe" series of anthologies of original stories. This "new" Universe is edited by Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber, and

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contains stories by Kim Stanley Robinson, Ursula K. Le Guin, and M. J. Engh, among others (Doubleday, $19.95 hardcover, $7.95 paper). . . . Donald Wandrei, a cofounder of Arkham House and now nearly forgotten, was a mainstay of *Weird Tales* and *Astounding* in the 1930s. His collected science fiction has been published in a handsomely illustrated (by Rodger Gerberding) volume as *Colossus* (Fedogan & Bremer [Minneapolis, Minnesota is the only address I can cull from the review copy], $28.00).

Arkham House has come up with a "Golden Anniversary Anthology" for HPL titled *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos,* by "H.P. Lovecraft and Divers Hands." As everyone knows, Lovecraft's cosmic theology revolving around gooey gods from other dimensions such as Cthulhu was not only incorporated into a large percentage of his own stories, but was borrowed by other writers, his contemporaries and many that came after. This golden anniversary (of HPL's birth) collection has only two of his stories in it, "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Haunter of the Dark." But the "divers hands" are quite a list indeed; the other stories are by Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Frank Belknap Long, August Derleth, Brian Lumley, Robert Bloch, Henry Kuttner, Fritz Leiber, Ramsey Campbell, Joanna Russ, Karl Edward Wagner, Philip José Farmer, Stephen King, and Richard A. Lupoff—a veritable shoggoth of writers! There are also some correctly atmospheric illustrations by Jeffrey K. Potter, several featuring tentacles, as well as a particularly neat frontispiece which is a rather formal portrait of HPL and several of his characters. All in all, it's a celebratory volume that Cthulhu should be proud of. (Arkham House, $23.95)

Reprints, etc. . . . Anthony Boucher's long out of print collection of fantasy stories, *The Compleat Werewolf,* is again available (Carroll & Graf, $4.50, paper). . . . A Dean Ing story that appeared in parts in *Man-Kzin Wars* and *Man-Kzin Wars II* has been published as one volume under the name of *Cathouse* (Baen, $3.95, paper) . . . and James Blish's classic *Black Easter* has been published in one volume with *its* sequel, *The Day After Judgement,* under the title of *The Devil's Day* (Baen, $3.95, paper) . . . *and* the two Bolo novels, *Bolo* and *Rogue Bolo,* by Keith Laumer, have been published as *The Compleat Bolo* (Baen, $3.95).

Robert L. Forward's *Rocheworld* is not exactly a reprint. It's his 1982 novel, *Flight of the Dragonfly,* substantially rewritten and with an added fifty thousand words. To the publisher's credit, this is made very clear on the cover. The rather oblique explanation for the new version is that the original was rushed to publication before the author was ready (Baen, $4.50, paper).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Isaac Asimov Presents the*

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Great SF Stories: 20 (1958) edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW, $4.95, paper) and *Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers and other stories from Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* edited by Sheila Williams and Charles Ardai, Delacorte Press, $14.95.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., N.Y., N.Y. 10014.●

NEXT ISSUE

Exciting new writer **Phillip C. Jennings** returns to these pages next month with our evocative October cover story, "The Betrothal." In this fat and fanciful novella, Jennings takes us to a strange distant world, a huge and mysterious planet roamed by a nomadic civilization of caravans and immense wheeled wagon-cities, and sweeps us along with him as he follows the adventures and misadventures of Princess Tersiz, a royal pawn in the game of diplomacy who finds herself forced to become a player as well if she is to survive. This is a vivid and richly colored story full of adventure, romance, and barbaric splendor, one you won't want to miss. Deadly games of global diplomacy and international intrigue are also featured in another major new novella next issue, as multiple Hugo and Nebula-winner **Robert Silverberg** takes us sideways in time for a look at an alternate African empire caught in a moment of crisis and transition, in the exotic and powerful "Lion Time in Timbuctoo." The mighty Emir of Songhay is dying, and the reins of power *should* pass to Little Father, his successor... but other people have other plans, plans that could alter the fate of nations, plans that soon enmesh everyone in an intricate web of politics and passion, intrigue and betrayal and love. As compelling and fascinating as only Silverberg could make it, this is sure to be one of the major stories of the year.

ALSO IN OCTOBER: Nebula Award-winner **Nancy Kress** returns with a suspenseful look at a very unusual—and very dangerous—high-tech competition, played out across the gameboard of a deserted and devestated Earth, in the gritty "Touchdown"; wildly inventive British author **Ian Watson** takes us to the ancient city of Barcelona for a fateful and chilling encounter with an ominous apparition, in the unsettling "Gaudi's Dragon"; gonzo fantasist **Don Webb** takes us to a somewhat-skewed version of a hobo jungle during the Great Depression, and, in a funny, fey, and oddly lyrical tale, sweeps us along with its ragtag inhabitants on "A Half-Dime Adventure" you'll never forget; and World Fantasy Award-winner (and noted anthologist) **Kathryn Cramer** makes her *IAsfm* debut with the wry and sprightly tale of a little girl, an enigmatic alien, and "The End of Everything." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our October issue on sale on your newsstands on August 21, 1990.

COMING SOON: Our special Double-Length November issue, with twice the usual number of pages, featuring a big, evocative new novella by **Kim Stanley Robinson,** a fast-paced, scary dinosaur story by **Allen Steele,** a new Mama Jason story by **Janet Kagan,** and as much other work by as many different authors as we can possibly jam into it. Don't miss this special issue, and a very special treat.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Here's a look past the circum-WorldCon lull, into September. Lots of overseas cons around this time of year. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; say why you're calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (again, say why you're writing). Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.

JULY 1990

27-29—**Travelling Fete.** For info, write: **Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307.** Or call **(813) 867-1111** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: St. Petersburg FL (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests include: Charles L. Fontenay. At Econo Lodge South Central. Low-key relaxacon.

AUGUST 1990

3-5—**RiverCon. (502) 448-6562.** Hyatt, Louisville KY. Mike Resnick, G. A. Effinger, G. Laskowski.

3-5—**ICon. (604) 382-4400.** Ramada Inn, Victoria BC. Michael Coney, Donna Barr, Nichelle Nichols.

3-5—**HungaroCon. (361) 22-85-19.** Budapest, Hungary. Dates estimated; in August. National con.

18-19—**Japan National Con, % YUYU, Box 108, Asakusa, Taito-ku, Tokyo 111, Japan.** At the Kokaldo.

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $85 to 7/15.

24-26—**BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176.** Jennifer Robertson. If you can't get to Holland.

30-Sept. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $75 to end of June.

SEPTEMBER 1990

3-9—**SocCon, 20 Vapzarov Str., Plovdiv 4000, Bulgaria. (32) 22-57-78.** Burgas, Bulgaria. Rest up . . .

7-9—***ParCon, % Ondrej Herec, Kamenarska 8, Bratislava B21 04, Czechoslovakia*** *. . . from WorldCon . . .*

7-9—**CopperCon, Box 11743, Phoenix AZ 85061. (602) 730-8648, 838-6873, 849-3338** . . . NASFiC.

14-16—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 882-0364.** C. Cherryh, Waller, Fancher, Worley.

21-23—**InCon, Box 1026, Spokane WA 99210. (509) 624-4330** Ing, Mott, Mirr, Finkbiner, Dalmas.

22-23—**ValleyCon, % Tony Tilton, Box 7202, Fargo ND 58108. (701) 232-1954.** No guests listed.

28-30—**Georgia Fantasy Con, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** Moorcock, Ellison, Gould.

28-30—**ConText, % Fanaco, Box 2954, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 889-0436.** For the written SF word.

AUGUST 1991

29-Sept. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $85 to 7/31/90.

AUGUST 1992

28-Sept. 1—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027.** The 1992 World SF Con. $65.

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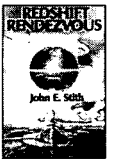

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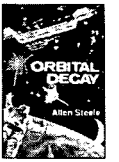

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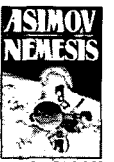

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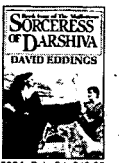

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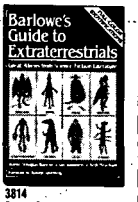

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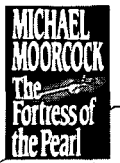

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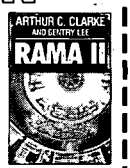

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